

# 博多豚骨 ラーメンズ

HAKATA TONKOTSU RAMENS

木崎ちあき  
CHIAKI KISAKI



# Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens

vol.1

by Chiaki Kisaki

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Translation Group: [kaedesan721](#)

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# Seasonal Opening Ceremony & First Inning

“There is someone you want to kill at any cost. It does not matter the motive behind it. For instance, it could be that person killed your lover, or your objective is that person’s assets. Either way, you have to kill that person no matter what. Now then, what would you do?”

The job applicants all together were dumbfounded at the interviewer’s wild question. They were clad in new suits without one wrinkle in them and had their backs perfectly straight, but their mouths were wide open in shock.

*What did he say just now? Kill someone? I misheard, right?* Everyone there thought that.

“If it was you, how would you kill someone?” The interviewer repeated back. It seems they did not mishear him.

*How would you kill someone, he says? I can’t think of it. I shouldn’t think of it.* If he had seriously thought of doing such an act, right now he would not be at an interview but in prison.

Saitou eagerly forced his non-operating mind to work and thought. *What is the purpose of this question? What is being asked?*

*Is it to test his deliberateness or ethics? What kind of answer is the corporation side looking for from a student?* Awkwardly keeping a fake smile on his face, he read deeply into the question desperately.

There were only two questions the interviewers made before this. “What are your strengths and weakness?” and “What did you strive for as a student?” Those were the staple questions that appear in employment interviews.

Even the students curled up in themselves in apprehension were able to manage providing some kind of exemplary answer for those questions they thought of ahead of time even with their voice shaking. Just as they got a breath of relief and the tension able to lessen the “How will you kill a person?” came up. It felt like after proceeding from hitting back two straight balls thrown from the center to easily return by approximately a hundred kilometers a



sudden, irregular non-rotating fork ball was thrown at them.

He had read in a how-to book for job searching that at recent interviews there have been strange questions asked to shake up students. “If you got one billion yen, how would you use it?”, “What seasoning do you think you can compare to?” or “Please give us some kind of interesting story” seems to have been said before. It was to test their tactfulness in the moment. Saitou also made his resolve so he can be like that no matter what questions would come up. Although he came prepared, this was quite unexpected. *Rather than shaking him isn't this like a giant earthquake?*

There were three interviewers, and the one who asked the question was the man sitting in the center. In comparison there were five students. Saitou faced the interviewer from the right edge, sitting in the seat closest to the exit. The answers will start from the farthest student on the left side. Saitou's turn will be last.

If Saitou had even one unofficial offer he would reject it saying “I don't know” and take his leave. But having sent entry sheets to fifty companies now, that was hopeless. The fiftieth one was the first interview he managed to get. It is tough. He still has time before his turn. He had to find a good answer no matter what in that time frame to give a good impression to the interviewer.

The first student honestly answered, “It is against the law, so I cannot kill a person.”

At that moment a strange feeling swept through the students. It was the kind of atmosphere of relief. “Ah, that's good.” “So there was no need to think so deeply about it?” They concluded this question passed to them was a test of their ethics. After that the other three also addressed drawn-out fastidious, argumentative words of principle that “we cannot commit murder.”

“Even in the case if you don't kill them, you will be killed?” The one the interviewer questioned back to was the student next to Saitou. His turn was coming up already.

The female student wore a pantsuit with her long hair tied back. She nodded with full confidence. “Yes. Even then, I cannot violate the law.”

Saitou laughed in his mind at the simplicity of it.

*They are testing their ethics?*

*By chance, is that really the case?*

Saitou could do not consider that. *Are they looking for students with distinction in the 'must not kill' aspect? That cannot be it. You cannot kill people; even elementary schoolers know at least that much. The issue is not that.* He sensed that the bored face the interviewer was making was telling that.

"Now then, next, Saitou-kun. Please answer."

His turn had finally come around.

Even if he said the same thing as them that could not leave any sort of impression on the interviewer. And so, Saitou decided to state a different answer from them. *Whatever happens, who cares.*

"I have almost killed a person before."

The halfhearted mood drifting among the students froze within a moment. *What is this guy saying?* Those surprised expressions of the students appeared in his mind.

"Oh?" The interviewer raised his voice and bent forward, intrigued. "What do you mean by that?"

"When I was in high school I belonged to our baseball club. It was a famous veteran school even within the Kantou region, and I was an ace pitcher." He said it with a bit of pride put in casually. "I even participated at Koshien."

"Is that so? But you do not have that written on your entry sheet."

Just as the interviewer said, 'baseball' was not written under hobbies or special skills.

"Even though you were an ace pitcher for a veteran school, you did not enter baseball clubs or baseball circles at university? That's a shame."

"I have become unable to pitch a ball."

"Is it an injury?"

"No."

After letting out a quiet exhale, he continued.

“When I pitched at Koshien I ended up hitting the batter in the head. He collapsed and stopped moving. He then was carried out on a stretcher and went to the hospital in an ambulance. The place he got hit was severe, and he was in a critical, comatose state.”

The batter miraculously recovered afterwards, but he could not throw a bat for the spring and summer of their third year.

“At that time I was really afraid I could have become a murderer. I was so unbearably afraid I ended up getting the yips. Since then I couldn’t find control and couldn’t throw towards people. I don’t even like to play catch.”

“I see. So you quit baseball.”

“Yes. So I’m not suited to be a murderer.” Saitou smiled in self-torment. “I don’t have the courage or the skill for it, so in the case there is someone I want to kill no matter what I think I’d just pay others and have them kill them.”

It was a cheerful attitude. He did not know what kind of answer the company was looking for or what kind of students they were looking for. Even so, he did what he could. He put out his best. He had no regrets even if it gets rejected. That was what he thought.

Two weeks after that, a notification of an unofficial offer reached Saitou. He was delighted nearly jumping in joy.

Saitou at this time still did not know that the answer he brought forth at the last moment with, ‘in the case there is someone I want to kill no matter what I’d just pay others and have them kill them,’ was in fact the management philosophy of this company.

### **Top of First Inning**

On a Friday night the shop was crowded with people. This pub where small-earning salary men and students gathered had half of the private rooms with all the seats set up as *horigotatsu* and isolated with grid patterned walls in every direction. Munakata and his group were lead into the pub. Next to them two company employee-like men were gulping down their drinks with a hard expression. The inside of the place was rambunctious, so he could not hear their voices, but surely they were grumbling complaints about their job. /

*understand the feeling*, Munakata bowed his head in sympathy.

Once the drinks were brought over,

“At any rate, good work for this year.”

The eldest of them, Munakata, took the lead for a toast with a hoarse voice. Raising the mug of his draft beer, he clanked it against each of the four glasses gathered at the middle of the table. Three were draft beers, and one was an oolong tea.

Washing down his throat half of the drink in one go with white bubbles caught around his mouth, “Aah, this is good. It’s so refreshing.” Munakata spit out an old-man like phrase. Actually, he was one. He was already forty years old, and wrinkles stood out around the corners of his eyes and mouth. If it were not for the black eye-patch covering his right eye, he would look like any ordinary middle-aged man. Regardless, for a normal middle-aged man what he wore was first-class. From the tucked in sleeves of his high quality stripped suit a branded wristwatch was peeking out.

“Munakata-san, there are still another two months for this year left.” The one sitting next to him, Shinohara, said as he drank his oolong tea. “Don’t you think it’s too soon to forget the year?”

Shinohara was still a newcomer. He wore the same suit as Munakata, but more than a company employee he looked like a university student who attended a coming-of-age ceremony. Presently, he was still a university student. Paired up with Munakata their age gap was separated enough to not appear to be parent and child.

“It’s fine. We’ll be getting so busy we won’t have time for a year-end party.”

“Ah, please call over the waiter. I would like *motsunabe*.”

“Listen.”

“Can I order gizzards?” The person sitting in front of Munakata, Reiko, had asked him this time. While pulling her loosely permed, brown hair back in the shape of a pelican’s beak with a hair clip she stared at the front of the shop’s menu. “Blue mackerel is fine too. Is it alright if I order it?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“But you’re treating, right?”

Munakata shut his mouth before he asked, *why me*. Among the four of them, he was the eldest and their senior. That Japanese tendency for elders and seniors to have to treat the ones below was quite annoying. He swiped a hand through his gelled bangs roughly.

“Munakata.” A large, half-Russian man named Ivanov who was sitting next to Reiko said to him in a murmured whisper. “I’ll pay half.”

“You’re generous.” Munakata told him keenly. His face was frightening, but his personality was kind. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. It’s my treat. Eat up.”

After saying that, he cursed himself a little. He was worried by saying ‘eat up’ that he might take everything off the menu; Ivanov was huge. But fortunately the giant that was more than two meters tall arched his back and ate small portions of appetizers. He was also wearing a suit but with no tie. He had a crew cut of light-brown hair with several scars on his face.

“Shino, why are you drinking oolong tea? Drink some beer.”

Munakata pressed since he was over twenty, but Shinohara made an apparent revolted face to his comment. “Munakata-san, that’s harassment.”

“Shut up.”

“If you’re saying that, then for Ivanov-san,” Shinohara glared at Ivanov. “Why are you drinking beer?”

“Is it wrong?”

“Normally it’s vodka, right? Since you’re Russian, drink vodka.”

“You know, that’s racist.”

“I’m not Russian. I’m from Saitama.” It was a habit for Ivanov to speak in a murmur, unfitting for his large size.

“Now then, let’s get into the main topic.” Around the point their ordered meals were being brought out, Munakata began to speak. “You know there is a mayoral election next month, right?”



“A mayoral election?” The one who asked was Shinohara. “What’s that?”

“Ah, right. Since you just got in you wouldn’t know.”

“It’s the election for the mayor of Fukuoka.” Reiko cut in. “There’s one every four years. Our boss was first elected eight years ago. This next one will be his third term.”

“At this time there will be a lot of occasions the boss will go out in front of the public for assemblies, lectures, and speeches.”

“That seems pretty bothersome.”

“Yeah, it is. There may be guys who have a grudge against the boss and pretend to be a supporter aiming to take his life. During this time until the election ends we’ll have someone to watch over the boss. Reiko and Shino, I’d like for you two to alternate.”

“Ehh.” Shinohara frowned. “Right now I have testing going on, so I’ll be busy.”

“Like I said, Ivanov and I can’t wander around near the boss.” If a large man with scars on his face and a man with an eye-patch were near the mayor, it would look nothing but suspicious. “We are killers. We’re not bodyguards. Leave it to the guys in charge of the boss’s safety, while you guys think of killing anyone making an attack on the boss. Got it?”

“Understood.” Reiko said while putting the blue mackerel in her mouth.

Shinohara was still dissatisfied. He muttered a complaint, “My credit is important though.”

Having placed the portable stove in the center of the table, the *motsunabe* was simmering in it in front of the four of them. Once the flame died down a bit, the conversation continued.

“Our main job is not ensuring the safety of the boss’s *well-being*. It is to ensure the safety of the boss’s *position*. Any raising factors in the mayoral election would cause a small scandal to become fatal. Be watchful when around the boss and eliminate any obstacles. Crush any convenient bad information before it gets out.”

“Like always, you mean.” Shinohara said as he fixed his glasses.

“That’s right. So, the first thing is this guy.” Munakata took out a picture of a man and several documents from his bag. “It’s the Hakata police office’s ground. It seems he is secretly looking into the connection between the boss and the crime syndicate.”

“How about I kill him.” Ivanov said and took them. “Can I strangle him?”

“Strangle him and have him hanged. And then there is the case with the boss’s son-”

“It has turned into quite the season for delicious hot pot, hasn’t it.” Shinohara interrupts the conversation and prepares his own *motsunabe*.

“Listen.”

“What do we do with this dish? For the last part.”

“It’s just miso, right?” Reiko says. It is with an attitude like it could not be anything but miso.

“It’s *ojiya*.” Ivanov objects.

*Either is fine.* Munakata let out a sigh. “I guess we’ll just leave work for later and eat for now.”

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### Translation Notes:

1. Koshien 甲子園 - Koshien stadium is where the Japanese National High School Baseball Championship is held. It is located in Nishinomiya City, in Hyogo Prefecture.
2. Horigotatsu - A space in the floor with a table covering it.
3. Motsunabe - Miso nabe made with offal and vegetables.
4. Ojiya - A rice gruel containing vegetables and fish and seasoned with miso or soy sauce.

# Second Inning

## Top of Second Inning

“Killing the detective was successful.” There was the call from Ivanov. He killed the detective the night before, show casing it as a suicide and then made contact with someone related to the police. Now today they seemed to have handled it as a suicide. Naturally, he would have to pay the collateral though.

Munakata was in a parking structure at a certain place about a ten minute walk from Kego park. While he was having a smoke in the driver’s seat of a black sports van, there was a knocking sound on the passenger’s side window. Reiko was peering in from the outside. She must have just came back after switching places as the mayor’s bodyguard with Shinohara.

“Good work. Was there anything abnormal?”

“There was a gunshot.”

“What did you say?”

“Well, that’s what I thought, but it was just a child’s balloon popping.” Reiko also took a cigarette and lit it. “How about on your end?”

“It seems it went well. The detective is being handled as a suicide victim.”

“We won’t have decent deaths.” Reiko blew out white smoke. “We kill people who don’t do any wrong just by the reason they were in the mayor’s way.”

“It can’t be helped. We’re workers. We can’t go against the orders from above.”

Just as he was extinguishing the lit cigarette, abruptly, the sound of his cellphone in his breast pocket went off. It was an incoming call.

The characters ‘the son’ was displayed on the screen. It was not Munakata’s son, but his boss’s son. Munakata did not have any family in the first place.

While anticipating the worst, he took the call. “Hello.”

[Munakata-saan. It’s me.] He heard the voice of a young man. It was a slow and lax voice that irritated others. [Soorryy. I did it again.]

“What is it?”

[I killed a girrl.]

*Again, huh.* Munakata sighed. “I’ll head over right away,” he said and then dropped the call.

Reiko frowned next to him. “What’s wrong? Is there an issue?”

“The perverted son did it again.”

“What is it this time?” Reiko was exasperated. “Was it robbery? An assault? Rape?”

“Rape and murder. Sorry, Reiko. But can you go there for a bit?”

“Haa?” Reiko grimaced. “Why me?”

“I’m busy. I have to kill some yakuza right now. I can’t let anyone else go. Ivanov is dealing with the aftermath of the detective’s death. Shino is being a bodyguard for the mayor. There’s no one else but you.”

“Can’t you ask someone else in the same trade? Wouldn’t it be fine to ask someone from Murder Inc?”

“The boss doesn’t like outsourcing. It’d be a problem if a secret gets let out. If he’s going to hire someone, it has to be someone for a permanent employment like us.”

Reiko gave a big sigh. “I hate that kid.”

“It’s alright. You’re not the only one.” Munakata smiled bitterly. “Everyone probably hates him.”

“Probably. He makes me want to kill him.” For a killer to say this, it had a strange persuasive meaning.

“Just don’t do that.” No matter how far below he is, his parent would not be silent about it if his true son was killed. “Then I’d have to kill you.”

He said reluctantly. Reiko opened the door to the passenger’s seat. “Eliminating those who get in the way, protecting the mayor, and even wiping that shitty kid’s ass too. At this rate, it seems we’ll die by overworking. Do killers get working compensation?”

“Who knows.”

Reiko left, with the sound of heels clicking in her wake. While watching her leave from the back mirror, her previous words resurfaced to his mind.

‘We won’t have decent deaths.’

That was most certainly true. Looking at his watch, Munakata started the car. There was time to immerse in his emotions later. Stopping in another parking structure, he made preparations for his assignment. He took out the sniper rifle and locked on his target. The muzzle was pointed towards the hideout of the gang. The distance between his target and him was five hundred meters. It was enough. With one eye he peered into the scope. Although, Munakata only had one eye to begin with.

From the office, the man he was targeting came out. He spotted the man’s face in the scope. Right in dead center. He pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the man in the back of the head. The man fell, and the underlings rush to him. While the place was in disarray, Munakata went back to the car and left the scene.

### **Bottom of Second Inning**

Arriving in Fukuoka, the first thing that surprised Saitou was how well the access to the airport was. Fukuoka airport was not even a distance of two stations from Hakata, the center of the city. Since an airplane was flying in the sky above the city was is put off by the loud noise, but compared to Tokyo where he had to switch to a monorail it was rather convenient. Like this it would have been better to come here via airplane instead of the shinkansen. He slightly regretted it.

Hakata station was crowded, but it was not as much as Shibuya and Shinjuku. He heard it was a dangerous city with a population of three percent being killers, but it did not feel like that too much. In actuality, he had the impression that it was more peaceful than the city he lived in until now. The pace of people walking from the station was easy-going; it did not feel rushed. At a glance, it was peaceful.

Walking inside the station, a sweet scent wafted over. In the center of the station there was a croissant shop, and there was a line for it. While he was

pulled in by the scent, Saitou headed for the exit on quick feet.

Leaving the Hakata exit to the outside, there was a plaza, and many taxis were lined up waiting for customers. From the next bus station, he got on the belt-line bus to go to Tenjin for one hundred yen.

The Murder Inc Fukuoka branch had an office in one room of a rental office building in Tenjin. Though it was small for an office. There was only a television set, a sofa, and a desk. More than an office, it felt like a room for a salary man. When Saitou visited the office, a middle aged man greeted him with a smile.

“Are you Saitou-kun?”

Saitou straightened his posture and answered. “Yes. I came from the head office in Tokyo. I am Saitou. Nice to meet you.”

“You came ‘ere right up and early. Well, you oughta drink coffee or somethin’.”

The head of the Fukuoka branch was far kinder than his previous superior. His speech was slower and thick in a Hakata accent. The corner of his eyes were drooped, so he already looked like he was smiling. His stomach poked out a bit, and he slightly resembled his baseball manager in high school. He was that coach who often said the phrase, “don’t give up until the end.”

Although he was in the middle of work, he was watching the TV while drinking a beer. It was timeout in baseball. It was the Japanese Series, the fourth game between the Carps and the Hawks. He saw them outside the shinkansen window only an hour ago. It was that same stadium.

His superior did not start talking to him much. He was watching the TV as though eating into it. “Sorry. Right now is really somethin’, wait a sec.” He had said, so Saitou watched the development of the game sitting on the sofa reluctantly as well. It had been a while since he watched baseball.

At present, it was the top of the third inning with the Hawks at offense. With two outs and bases loaded, the fourth player, a Dominican, walked up to the plate. It was a tremendous swing. If a smooth ball was thrown, he could easily hit it to the stands. The catcher prepared for a low outside pitch. The sign was likely the slider running further outfield. However, the ball the pitcher threw did



not have much curve to it. It was pretty much a straight ball, right in the center.

As though anticipating it, those dark skinned strong arms swung the bat full swing. He pulled the ball with all his might. It was a hard line drive. He thought it passed by third and short. The young player on third leapt to the side. His left hand stretched out and caught it. He then fell safely, rolled quickly and then stood back up. He raised his left hand high in the air and appealed to the umpire. In his glove, he was grasping the ball. It was a fine save for the team.

“Ahh!” His superior grasped his head and made a face as though he saw the world’s end. “Aah, enough already! Why was it like that!”

This time it managed to be caught, but the pitcher’s attitude was another thing. It would be a good plan to relieve the pitcher soon. When the next batter was up, they would probably switch. That was what he thought.

“I made you wait, ain’t that right?” Now on break and the commercials starting, his superior finally brought up the main matter at hand. “This is your new ID.”

He received a new license. His name was the alias Takuya Itou, and his place of residence was in Fukuoka City, Hakata Ward. It was forged license.

“So, sorry for this bein’ so sudden, but won’t you kill this person here? You got until nine o’clock tomorrow night.”

His superior handed him the data. While listening to what he had to say, Saitou looked over it. The target’s name was Jun Murase. He seemed to be a university student.

“The client is a neighbor and landlord of the apartment. He be always makin’ a fuss, so he was sayin’ to kill him. He been said to be a trouble in the neighborhood. Ah, the master key is borrowed from the landlord but use it if you need to.”

“Haa.....”

“There been lots of these sort of requests recently. Not just people there. There been even, the neighbor dog is annoying so kill ‘im. We ain’t some sort of health care place.”

He laughed, but the game restarted again. It was the bottom of the third inning. The pitcher, throwing with his left arm, started to practice pitching.

Saitou excused himself with a, 'pardon me,' and left the office. He did not receive a reply from his superior who was daydreaming of the game.

It was apparent it was a wealthy household just by looking from the outside. It was a two-story house. There were three cars. It was probably a hobby of the father's. The mother's hobby seemed to be gardening. The garden was spread out as though surrounding the large house and was well maintained. On the nameplate were the characters Yamazaki. The Yamazaki household was a family of three: two parents and one son in high school.

Jiro had the minivan parked in front of the Yamazaki house. He was wearing work gloves, so he pressed the intercom. Beside him, the girl carrying a knapsack on her back was glancing around the area. Her name was Misaki. She was wearing knitted wool gloves.

Jiro's wife passed away early on, and he has raised his daughter Misaki, a first year elementary student, by himself. He was a blue collar worker, and so they moved all around the country frequently. Right now they were making their rounds and were distributing cakes in the neighborhood – that was their scenario.

"Misa-chan, you got it? We're going to do it just as we planned."

Misaki nodded tiresomely to reaffirm it. "Alright, alright. I got it."

After a few moments, a boy wearing a school uniform came out from inside the house. He was tall, eloquent, and had the features that would make him popular with the girls. He was this family's one and only son, Shota Yamazaki.

"Who are you?" Shota asked.

"We just moved to the neighborhood. I am Tanaka. I wished to give a proper greeting but.....Are you the son? Are your parents in?"

"Ahh, um, my parents are traveling and won't be back until tomorrow. My apologies."

"Is that so. How unfortunate." Jiro stroked his groomed beard with a

disappointed expression. They have taken care of inquiring about the parents whereabouts. “Alright then, this is not anything special. Tell your parents I said hello.”

He handed over the box of cakes. It was a box of fifty *torimon*.

Shota came out from the house and approached Jiro to try and take it. It was that moment.

“Whoaa, this house is soo biig!”

Misaki yelled. She opened the gate doors, slipped beside Shota and trespassed into the house.

“Ah, stop! Wait.” Jiro called out to her, but Misaki did not stop. “Excuse me, Yamazaki-san. I’ll only be in for a moment!”

“Eh, wait a sec-” He shook off Shota’s attempt at restraining him, and Jiro entered inside as well.

The layout of the Yamazaki household was well instilled in them. Misaki ran around the house as though it was her own, and headed straight for the bathroom. Jiro followed behind her as well. From behind them, Shota pursued after them in haste.

“Ahh, it’s a kitty!” Misaki opened the door and shouted out excitedly. “Papa, there’s a kitty!”

In the bathroom was one black cat. It was not big but neither was it small. It was probably a stray cat. The cat was a little bit dirty. Nearby were knives, hammers, and other dangerous tools set aside.

Shota turned pale. It was the expression that something that was not meant to be seen was seen.

“Hey, mister. What were you planning to do with this cat?”

Shota panicked at Misaki’s question. “W-well, um.”

“Young man. Could it be you were going to kill this cat?”

Shota was at a loss for words.

“Shota Yamazaki-kun.” Jiro’s manner of speaking suddenly changed. “It seems

you're a fairly popular guy at school. You excel at all sports, are great in studies, and have plenty of friends. Your father and mother are elites, and you live in such a stunning home. Though no one would guess you do something like this behind closed doors."

"Wh-what are you guys?" Shota's voice shook.

"Do you know the avengers? Well, you probably don't know. For a normal high schooler such as yourself that is part of a world unrelated to you."

"You can't say a high schooler who kills animals is normal, right?" Misaki commented.

Her speech changed from how she was just previous to a pretty adult like way of speaking.

Shota frowned. "Avengers?"

"Just like the characters say, an avenger takes on the role of avenging others. For instance, let's say there was a person who killed someone's lover. And that person pays us and requests vengeance. We search for the culprit and kill that culprit in the exact same manner. There's something called the Code of Hammurabi, isn't that right? You dear must have learned that in world history since you're a high school student, correct? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That idea. It's the same as that."

"I saw your website. You abuse animals and upload pictures and videos on there right." Misaki scolded him with a smile. "You're the worst."

"The eighth cat you killed was not a stray cat. It was a pedigreed cat raised lovingly by Miura-san in a wealthy home, but it managed to run away from an opening in the window. You captured him and then killed him. In such a grotesque way. Miura-san is beyond upset. They said they wanted to give the culprit the same treatment. So they requested us to avenge him."

Finally grasping the situation, the complexion in Shota's face changed.

"An eye for an eye," Misaki said, opening both her eyes wide. Then she showed her white teeth and smiled. "A tooth for a tooth."

"Say, Jiro-chan." Just as Shota lost consciousness, Misaki asked. "How was it?"

My acting?"

Jiro sent back a smile. "It was perfect, Misa-chan. That's an academy award for best actress."

"Wasn't it unnatural? Do elementary school kids really talk this stupidly?"

"Plays resonate more with the audience having it a bit unnatural."

"Hmmm." While saying that, she took out rope from her knapsack.

Binding Shota's limbs, Jiro carried him out on his shoulders. After carefully checking to make sure they would not be seen, they shove him into the back seat of the minivan.

*Now then, this is the end of the job,* he thinks.

Misaki held the cat and cutely tilted her head. "Hey, Jiro-chan. What are we going to do with the cat?"

It was the black cat that was going to be Shota's victim but fortunately managed to escape from certain death. He was probably picked up somewhere or taken from a shelter. "We can let him go around there." Jiro suggested.

However, Misaki said, troubled. "I want to keep him."

"Ha?"

"Can't we keep him at our place? I'll take good care of him."

She tightly hugged the cat in both arms. *She looks like a child here.* He thought.

Jiro shook his head with a tired expression. "Of course we can't. Our apartment doesn't allow pets."

"Then we can keep him at your bar!"

"Absolutely not."

Misaki's mouth turned into a frown, and she whispered a murmur. ".....You took me in though."

*Saying that was just foul play.*

"Ahh, alright! I got it!" He exclaimed with a large sigh. This was his loss.

“However, the price for food will be taken from your pay!”

Misaki’s expression immediately brightened. “Okay! I love you Jiro-chan!”

As though it understood the conversation just now, the black cat cutely mewed. A happy purr came from its throat. *Gosh, all the okama motherly instincts are itching*, Jiro slumped his shoulders.

“In exchange, you better work hard.” He told Misaki while getting into the car. “We’re busy today.”

“Of course.” Misaki was in a good mood. “Who’s next?”

“It’s this man.” He took out the data and handed it to Misaki in the passenger’s seat. “Jun Murase, a university student.”

“What did this person do?”

“An assault murder. He beat up a foreigner to death half playing with his friends.”

“Whoa, that’s the worst.” Misaki grimaced. “It’d be great if all those terrible people just die.”

*More than that what should I name him?* Misaki smiles happily and kissed the black cat’s nose.

The informant Banba was a regular customer to for many years was called by the name Enokida. Since his head resembled an enoki mushroom, he was Enokida. His real name was unknown.

Enokida did not have a designated residence and was always in an internet cafe somewhere in Fukuoka city. Today he was in Nakasu. He was in a booth with reclining chairs in a relatively new shop on the fifth floor of the Gate’s building. He struggled to find him. When Banba came in, Enokida was in the middle of hacking the Fukuoka prefecture police’s data base.

“Welcome, Banba-san.”

Enokida’s outfit was flashy as always. His hair was dyed exceedingly white, closer to blond, and his bangs were long that covered half of his face. With his impressively enough mushroom-like hair his head was shaped so it was unclear in which was the front or back. It was not just his head, but his clothes were



flashy too. Today he was wearing a fluorescent yellow parka over a long sleeved T-shirt with English scrawled on it. Below he was wearing red skinning jeans. His shoes were checkered patterned rubber soles, they were left together at the entrance of the booth. In exchange, he was wearing black slippers the store lent out.

“Though I called you, you didn’t pick up.”

“Sorry, my bad. I turned it off. So, what’s it for today?”

After confirming there was no one else in the area, Banba brought up the topic.

“I have somethin’ I’d like you to look into.” He told him and handed over the photo.

“It’s the mayor.” Seeing the photo, Enokida grinned. “Banba-san, you’re neck deep into some trouble again.”

“A man who done got his neck in pretty deep the same way seems to have died by hangin’.”

“Whoa, seriously? That’s crazy.” Enokida’s tone as he said that was cheerful.

“What I want you to look into is this woman.” He pointed to the woman shown next to the mayor. “I think she probably is a killer. The mayor’s.”

“Huh, a killer hired by the mayor. Then the chance of her being from the free lance line is pretty thin. There would be too much risks. There’s the possibility for her to get secrets and solicit money for it after all. So then she’d be someone with tight lips. Perhaps she’s a contracted specialist brought in from somewhere. Anyway, I’ll take a look.” And so he began to type on the keyboard. His ten fingers moved swiftly, as though his they were playing a difficult piano piece.

“Seem like you can get down and do it?”

“Do you think there’s something I can’t do?” Enokida snorted. “It’s easy for me to turn the traffic lights in Fukuoka City to all red.”

This was not just some boasting; it was the truth. He had kept the traffic lights on National Route 3 for more than ten minutes before. On the simple whims of

one man, he caused a congestion that spanned over five kilometers.

After a few minutes, information on the woman was displayed on his computer screen.

“Ahh, I got it. That woman. It seems she belonged to Murder Inc. until five years ago.”

“You got it already?” Banba was also surprised on how fast he was. He was always stunned by this man’s abilities. “That there’s amazin’.”

“There was that remote virus before, right? Using the same kind of virus I just set it up to disclose the information from them. It’s simple hacking.”

“Yeah, I don’t get none of it.”

It was not that Enokida’s explanation was poor. Banba knew very little about technology. To Banba who could hardly remember how to operate the folded device he bought a few years ago, even now in these times with the migration of moving from cellphones to smartphones, he considered Enokida’s words to be a foreign language.

“In other words, it’s like I injected a truth serum into their computer. They talk to me from the other side. The company Murder Inc. is strict when it’s in regards to infiltration on the inside, but they’re rather lenient in regards for things that left the outside of the company. Dealing with the unnecessary information is done half-heartedly so information on the company employees who quit or died is easy to obtain. Look, just because this super wary person set up a SECOM at his home and had a Doberman dog in the garden the waste that is the fully loaded personal information of the household would be left right in front of the house. It’s like that?”

“I gotcha.”

“The woman’s name in the photo is Reiko Asakura. It’s probably fake though.” Enokida read the characters on screen aloud. “Her specialty is poison. Her hobby is nail art. Six years ago she entered the company by a scout. It seems she was originally a girl in a cabaret club in Nakasu and was a freelance killer. She would approach the big shots, have them drink poison with their sake together and kill them bit by bit. She makes it look like they died from illness.

What a scary woman.”

“So does this mean she went up and left the company five years ago and been workin’ under the mayor since?”

“She was probably pulled out from there. If she was made a secretary, then a woman killer is conveniently used.”

Perhaps there could be other killers taken out from Murder Inc as well. “By the way, among the fellas who quit Murder Inc, was there none who seemed specialized for strangulation?”

“Strangulation? .....Ahh, yes there is. There’s one.” Enokida read aloud his profile. “Ivanov Hisashi. He’s half Russian and half Japanese. His height is two meters and three centimeters, and his weight is one hundred and fifty kilograms. His specialty is hanging and strangulation. His special skill is lip reading. His hobby is building up his body, it says.”

There was a high possibility he was the culprit who killed Shigematsu’s senior detective.

“Thank you, Enokida-kun. I got to know lots because of you.”

When he handed over the payment and turned away, he was stopped by Enokida. “Where are you going?”

The identity of the woman in the photo was identified. The next was the skin headed man talking to the mayor. “I’m fixin’ to pitch some grub to the pigeons.”

“Ahh, Banba-san, wait a second.” Enokida handed over something to him. “Yes, I’m giving you this.”

“What is this here?”

It was a black mass no bigger than a centimeter. There were eight legs, and it took the shape of a small spider. However, it did not move at all.

“It’s a redback spider model listening device.”

“Redback spider?”

“You see, it’s a poisonous spider seen here and there all over Fukuoka long ago. It’s a guy with a red pattern on its back.”

“Ahh, there was critters like that.”

“It doesn’t look like a listening device, right? It’s programmed with a GPS. Just like how a spider weaves a web, it’ll gather information from various places. It’s my best work.”

“You went up and made somethin’ weird again.”

“I think it’ll help you.”

He decided to accept it. “.....Even so, why’s that there redback spiders got red backs?”

“Hm?”

He suddenly thought. “If they was normal black spiders then they’d be hard to tell apart. Like this, ain’t they basically sayin’ *I’m a poisonous spider; I’m dangerous?*”

Because of their red backs, they ended up being seen by humans and exterminated.

“.....That’s true.” Enokida hummed along to what Banba had said. “Why are they like that?”

“There’s critters that take a soil color to protect themselves from enemies in nature.”

“Then perhaps don’t you think they don’t have enemies? The redback spiders.”

“I reckon ‘bout that.” Banba, after thinking deeply about it for a few moments, said in a murmur. “.....I reckon it’s probably a more simple reason though.”

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#### Translation Notes:

1. Line Drive – A batted ball with less trajectory and is pretty level in its course.
2. Jiro is an okama. He talks extremely femininely. I debated using the feminine pronouns for him, but after receiving some advice and looking how other similar okama were handled, I stuck with the masculine

pronoun. The novel does use he/him pronouns in the narration as well. Okama is like its own separate gender; it's not synonymous to transgender.

# Third Inning

## Top of Third Inning

Nothing was more depressing than coming here. While looking up at the high class apartment of the thirty-five floor building standing tall beside the Fukuoka Tower, Reiko let out a magnificent sigh.

Getting out of the taxi in front of the entrance decorated in highly colored ornaments, she passed through the automatic locking entrance. There were four elevators in the hall. She got on the one for the upper floor and headed to the room on the top floor.

Once she got off the elevator, the door appeared right in front of her. This was that man's room. She was borrowing a duplicate key from Munakata. She opened the door without hitting the intercom. Above the shoe box in the entrance, there was a signed ball of a baseball player. He must have received it from a player that lived on the same floor. While taking off her shoes, she called out with a "I'm coming in." There was no response.

She headed right for the living room. There was one man there. His hair was a two-tone color of black and brown. He was wearing baggy grey sweatpants, and on various places they were soiled in blood.

This man was mayor Harada's only son, Yusuke Harada.

Yusuke was sitting on the expensive looking black leather sofa, watching television with a snack in one hand. It was a stupidly huge television like that of a movie theater screen. He probably bought it with his father's money. It was not just the television. Everything here was thanks to his father's money and influence. Even for this dumb, ill-mannered man to attend a rich national university within the best percentile in Fukuoka. Even for him to live in this high class apartment where professional baseball players would live in and be able to live here on his own without a part-time job as well. Even for him to be able to spend his time leisurely no matter how many people he killed and without any question to his crimes. *Life is unfair*, she considered deeply.

"Where is the girl?"



When she asked, Yusuke answered while still looking at the television. “On top of the bed.”

She headed to the bedroom as he said. The layout of the room is a 4LDK, but he only used the living room and bedroom. *Such a waste.*

Opening the bedroom door, Reiko instantly wanted to close her eyes. On top of the bed, a young girl was lying there, dead. She was left in an atrocious state, completely naked with her arms tied back with rope and legs spread wide open.

*What does that man think of women?* Reiko clicked her tongue. She returned to the living room soon after and offered an exhortation. “You know there’s a law that says you can’t kill people, right?”

“I don’t hate that kind of joke.” Yusuke bit into the snack while making crunching sounds. This was always the case, but it seemed he had no interest in taking it seriously.

“Who is that kid?”

“I dunno. A girl who walked around the area.”

“Why did you kill her?”

“She was being so noisy, crying and shit.”

“Then you can do it with women that wouldn’t rub you the wrong way. Hire a pro then.”

“I don’t really like women who are used to it. Look, eels for instance taste better when they’re from nature instead of ones that were cultivated, right?” Yusuke said, providing an incomprehensible example. “Besides, women prostitutes are rather loose? In their heads and their lower parts.”

*The one who is loose in the head and lower parts is you,* Reiko glared down at Yusuke. As a woman, she was always offended at this man’s speech and conduct. Each time she saw his smirking face, she felt disgust course through her being. She would think she would kill him sooner or later.

“Don’t do this again. It’s bothersome.”

“I can’t do that.” He answered immediately. “I can’t help myself. It’s just sometimes I end up wanting to kill the girls very much.”

“You got this? It’s fine if you don’t want to but end up killing them.” *It really is not fine though.* “Just don’t discard them around the area. Like before.”

The other day Yusuke had two of the same incidents like this one’s, but that time since he left the bodies in the outskirts it was caught by the mass media and got reported. The plan to have the bodies taken care of by their workers while avoiding public notice was a huge mess, and it was quite the struggle to erase the evidence Yusuke left behind. In the end, they were being treated as an unresolved case.

Yusuke replied back with a cheerful “yees” like a kindergartner. *Does he really get it? I can’t trust him.*

On the living room’s large television screen horrific shaky footage as though it was filmed by an amateur has been playing for a while now.

“What are you watching? Some kind of B movie?”

“Just a bit ago, I was drinking with my circle of friends, and we played the king game. Do you know the rules? For the king game. I’m the king, and I give orders to everyone.”

*As if there’s some kind of king game.* Reiko’s eyebrows knit together.

“So I made the order for an assault. On that foreigner that was in the area. This is the video I took at that time. Isn’t it funny?”

*It’s not funny at all. Just how crazy is this guy?*

“I really like seeing people suffer. When others around me are suffering, I feel like I can live comfortably, you know?”

In actuality, that was exactly true. This man lived more comfortably than normal people. All thanks to his father.

On the television screen, three university boys were kicking one man. They were hitting him with some sort of metal pipe. It looked like the one filming the event was Yusuke himself. His unique “oo-hyahyahya” disgusting laugh can be heard from the TV.

*What a bad taste in footage.*

While watching the video Reiko at ends wits sighed at the “oo-hyahyahya”

laughing of Yusuke.

“Tell me the names of the friends you were with then. Don’t leave any out.”

“Okay, but why?”

**Reiko answered, irritated. “Cause I’ll eliminate them.”**

### **Bottom of Third Inning**

After Banba left the Gate’s building, he walked to the riverside. Since it was still before eight o’clock at night the amount of passerby was not very much. Passing in front of the Nakasu information desk, right when he was about to turn the next corner he ran into a man. It was a host looking man with a porcupine-like head.

“Ah, sorry ‘bout that.”

After quickly bowing his head, the host tried to run off immediately. Banba grabbed the man’s arm at once.

“Have you gone and lost your touch now? Yamato-kun.”

When he called him by his name, the man’s eyes widened. “Ah, so it’s you, Banba-san.”

It was a man he knew. Yamato was a name of the Minamoto clan, and he worked at a host club called Adams in the west side of Nakasu. However, being a host is his side job, and his real job was as a pickpocket.

“Won’t you give my wallet back?”

When he pointed to his right hand, Yamato gave a bitter smile. “I got caught, huh.”

Banba’s wallet which was in his jean’s pocket somehow was in Yamato’s hand. While smiling frivolously, he handed back the wallet he just snatched. “Seriously now, I’m no match for you.”

“I ain’t givin’ you money even if you’re pitchin’ a fit.”

“More than that, Banba-san,” Yamato’s smile pulled back. “What is this photo?”

He said and what he showed him was the photo of the mayor he got from

Shigematsu. He did not realize he pickpocketed the photo as well. He takes that back; apparently he has not lost his touch.

“This boy,” What grabbed Yamato’s interest was not the mayor but the man in black clothes show behind him. “He was killed.”

“Killed?” That was a first. Shigematsu did not say anything about the boy.

“Yeah. It seems he died covered in blood in his room with his lover girlfriend. The room was a mess so it seems it was done by a thief, but all the rumors say it was really a hitman that killed him.”

“By a hitman?” For his life to be targeted by a killer, he must have done something unsatisfactory. “Why again?”

“This guy seemed to have run away with goods from the store and boasted on how he obtained money to an acquaintance. I heard the store this man worked for, Miroir, is a high-class club and a seriously dangerous organization.”

“Dangerous organization?”

“Who knows. I don’t really know the specifics either.”

“Where is this place, Miroir?”

“There’s the highest priced tenant building in Nakasu, the Brilliant Nakasu building, right? It’s the club the furthest in on the third floor. This room might be that club’s VIP room here.”

This was rather beneficial information. After Banba gave his thanks, he handed over a few million yen bills from his wallet to Yamato.

Soon after that Banba headed to the Brilliant Nakasu building. Naturally just by being inside the high class tenant building, Club. Miroir was an extraordinary shop. It had a black based chic designed upholstery, and a large chandelier was suspended from the ceiling. There was even a piano in the center. They probably enjoyed live performances as well. Just as the name suggested, the walls were all made of mirrors. It was the kind of club with the ambience that it would cost a few million yen just to sit here.

It was another ten minutes until the store opens. Inside the shop there were four to five people in black clothes busy getting preparations for the store

ready. The boys glared at Banba who suddenly walked into the store disregarding the fact they were in the middle of preparations with suspicious expressions.

“What do you need?” A man seemed to be around his thirties and wore black clothes. He approached Banba. From the prideful demeanor, he was probably this store’s manager.

Banba handed over his business card. “Excuse me, let me introduce myself.”

On the card the characters “Representative of the Banba Detective Office, Zenji Banba” and the office’s address were listed.

“.....You’re a detective?” The manager became more suspicious.

“Yes. I apologize for coming at a busy time. I have a few things I would like to ask you. The mayor came to this shop previously, correct? What type of people were with him at that time?”

The manager gave an immediate response. “Who knows, I don’t remember.”

“Though the mayor came, you don’t remember anything?”

The manager gave a faint smile. “Our facility is quite famous. Actors, comedians, and even professional baseball players come here. I can’t recall what kind of people came with the mayor one by one.”

“Is that so.” *That’s a lie*, he thought. “.....By the way, are there more male guests in this club?”

“Of course. Female guests don’t come often.”

*If a seldom female guest came in, would they normally recall that?*

“Do you really not recall anything regarding the mayor?”

The manager was sullen. *What a persistent guy*. That was the expression he gave of what he wanted to say. “Yes, I do not.”

“Is that so.”

“Now then, we have to set up the shop, so excuse us.”

He was driven away in the middle of it. He did not gain any significant information but leaving some bait is good enough for now.

*Now then, guess I should go have some ramen and go home.* Banba headed to his favorite shop.

*Can I really commit murder?*

Saitou was uneasy. While gazing at the data his baseball-loving superior gave him, a simulation played in his mind. His target was a university student by the name Murase. His time limit was until nine o'clock tomorrow night. The most certain method to go about it was to wait for his target to come home to kill him instead of searching around for him. Thinking that, Saitou headed to Murase's apartment.

On the way, he stopped by a twenty-four hour supermarket and bought rubber gloves. Speculating if people may be suspicious of him for only buying rubber gloves and think, "I wonder if this person is going to commit murder if he's buying rubber gloves," so he bought laundry detergent as well. Then he became worried people may be suspicious of him under the impression, "will this person kill someone with a chlorine based poison if he's buying laundry detergent." He knew this was just a persecution complex, and yet that did not matter. His anxiety only heightened.

While placing his items in the shopping bag, his gaze happened to spot a bulletin board above his head. There were various posters hanging there. There was a notification of a kindergarten athletic meet and a photo of a lost dog. There was also a pamphlet for recruiting sports teams, and among them an adult league amateur baseball team poster caught Saitou's eye. On the poster, a passage with an odd name read, 'In the middle of recruiting members! Welcoming beginners! In need of a pitcher and shortstop.' After that the representative's name was written. *Isn't a baseball team without a pitcher or shortstop like a band without vocals or guitar? How do they play a game,* he laughed. He felt his oppressive feelings lighten up just a little bit.

After leaving the supermarket, Saitou headed to the residence of his target. It was a cheap, two floor apartment building. He mustered up his courage and rung the intercom. If someone came to answer he thought to pretend to be a proselyte, but there was no answer. It seemed no one was home. It was a day off from school, so perhaps he went out somewhere.



With the key he borrowed previously, he slipped inside. For a young man living by himself the room was kept fairly clean.

While he was caught off guard coming home, he would attack him from behind and first put him to sleep with his home-made sleeping spray. He decided he would hide himself in the bathtub until his target came back. The moment he step foot into the bathroom Saitou was so frightened he jumped at the his reflection in the mirror. *What, it's just me, don't get so surprised*, he smiles bitterly. The reflection of him in the mirror has a terrible looking expression. He was pale and had the expression that he was about to die right now. Like this he did not know who would be killed.

In the empty bathtub Saitou shrunk his body and thought about his current situation. *Can I really kill a person? But I have to do it. If I miss up again I'll be killed by the company for sure this time. But, wait. No matter how much my life is worth would it really be alright to kill a person who did no wrong?* And now a harsh feeling of guilt reared up within him. Feeling his resolve waver, Saitou quickly shook his head. *I can't; not this. I have to get myself together.*

And suddenly the past came back to his mind. Of the incident of that pitch to the head. At that time Saitou also felt that guilt. That he did something terrible. However, thinking over it thoroughly he thought was it really just him that did something wrong. The opponent's pitcher was a player with bad habits, rumored to drink and smoke. He deserved it. It was divine punishment. His habitual habits were bad so he was met with the consequences. *I'm not in the wrong. I'm not bad.* Afterwards Saitou thought like that. Actually, it was better said he wanted to be convinced that was it.

*Isn't it the same for the man I'll kill? Since he caused trouble making a ruckus in the neighborhood, he ended up going to be killed. He deserves it.* Saitou tells himself this. *I'm not wrong.* At some point, he worked himself up.

It was then. Suddenly the chime rang, startling Saitou enough to jump.

– Someone came.

*Who is it? Did Murase come back? No, that can't be. Calm down. There's no way the person himself would press the intercom to his own home.*

Getting out of the bathtub he heads to the entrance, taking silent footsteps.

He peered through the peep hole. He saw the forms of two people. One was a muscular man wearing work clothes fitting to that at a construction site. The other was a young elementary school girl with her hair pulled back into two. “He isn’t coming. I wonder if no one is in.” “How about we wait in the car until he comes back?” “I guess we’ll have to.” They are having such a conversation.

*Wait until he comes back? No, that’ll be problematic.* Saitou was flustered. He did not know who they were. *But what would he do if they come into the room? What would he do if they found him?*

At any rate, he had to chase them away before that happens. Saitou decided to open the door. He would pretend to be the person himself or a friend, handle the situation properly and have them go home – was what he thought.

After regulating his breathing, he opens the door. “Yes?”

“Ah, are you Murase-san?” The man asked.

It appeared this man did not know Murase in person.

“Yes.” *I’m not though.* “I am.”

“We just moved on the floor below. I’m Tanaka. This isn’t anything special but.” The man said and pointed to the box of cakes.

*What is this, it’s just a normal moving greeting?* Saitou was relieved. The cold sweat cleared away. “Ahh, hold on just a moment. Thank you.”

Unlatching the door chain, it was that moment when he tried to take the cakes. A hand reached out to him. It was the man’s hand.

“Ugh, gah” He was grabbed by the collar and he choked.

The door opened wide, and the man entered. He had punched him in a vital point. He had learned in the company’s training that since nerves are dense in the kidneys, hitting there was exceptionally effective. *I see. That’s exactly right. My head has gotten dizzy. My legs are also weak.*

Saitou collapsed at the entrance. The girl also quickly entered the room and started to tie Saitou’s body with rope. *It is strangely efficient. Take that back, I don’t have any strength.*

*Just who are these people? Are they of the same profession (killers)? Even if*

*that was the case for the man in worker clothes, then who is the girl next to him? Looking at her, she is about elementary school age at least. There is no way a young child like this is a killer.*

*There's no way she's a killer? By chance is that really the case? Actually now thinking about it,* Saitou suddenly remembered. He had heard of there being a Chinese mafia that did this sort of work. It seemed they made an abundant amount of money in human trafficking. They purchased young children of poor regions in Asia, and after instilling the fundamentals of killing in them they sold them to terrorists and mafias around the world on top of having them raised as killers or juvenile soldiers. One could say they were disposable weapons. Such minor killers were rotting in this world. There was a veteran juvenile soldier in Murder Inc's Tokyo home branch as well. He was the man who shot the politician Saitou meant to kill with ease.

*It has become a crazy world.* Saitou thought that as the girl took packing tape out of her knapsack and sealed Saitou's mouth shut. Crimes were overflowing in Japan. It was dangerous all around. However more than half of humans did not know that. They believed this world was peaceful. It was being treated that way. He thought that in itself was more dangerous than anything.

"Are you kidding! What is that amount!"

Lin was furious. He was angry enough to think about killing the man in front of him right away.

Whereas the man in front of him was calm and composed. He was a skinhead man who was plump and wearing a poor taste of a purple suit. His face was round with a large nose like that of a pig. He was a man named Zhang, Lin's employer as well as a subordinate of the Kakyuu group.

Lin's angry voice could be heard throughout Zhang's office in Haruyoshi since then. Lin's hair was disheveled, and he tried to get on the desk and grab Zhang, but the underlings at both his sides stopped him and tore him off.

Puffing through his nose, he slammed down on Zhang's desk. "What's the meaning of this?"

Lin disputed with Zhang about his reward. Killing the man and woman was 1,000,000. He knew at least that. The issue was after that. "What's with this

three thousand yen? Traveling expenses? Elementary schoolers receive this much for pocket money nowadays.”

“It’s the appropriate amount.” Zhang made an innocent face and reclined back in the black leather chair and smoking a high quality cigarette from Cuba. He got irritated seeing him acting like that again.

“There’s no way the reward for killing a detective is three-thousand yen.”

“Killing a detective? You didn’t even kill him.”

“But the target is dead.”

“That wasn’t your feat. It’s not like you carried it out.”

“Then let me ask this.” Lin was wearing a suit instead of his woman outfit. It was standard to wear a suit when he visited the office. Once he returned home, he took a shower and removed his makeup. “For instance, I try to kill a certain man, and I attack him. However, the man had a chronic disease to begin with. The man surprised by my assaulting him causing him to have a heart attack and die. Would this also not be my work then? Even if it was not carried out by my hand directly, the man died because of me.”

“The detective was hung. You had nothing to do with it.”

“He may have been just scared his life was targeted by me and killed himself.”

“You’re a conceited kid.” Zhang shrugged his shoulders back. “Do you seriously think he committed suicide?”

Lin frowned. “.....What did you say?”

“That detective was killed.”

*There’s no way. The police said it was a suicide. It was even reported as such on even mass media.* “That’s a lie.”

“It’s not a lie. He was killed. After he was strangled to death he was hung with a rope. If you pay the police they’ll clean it up one way or the other.”

“What the hell is that.”

*In other words, he was beaten to it? By whom?*

“And for you to not even realize that. This is why you’re an amateur.”

Those were inexcusable words. “Shut up. I’m not an amateur.”

“Ahh, that’s right. You’re below an amateur.” Zhang ridiculed while slowly exhaling the white smoke. “You’re just a mere kid playing killer.”

Lin glared at Zhang. He would not let the provocation pass. “I’ll kill you, you shitty bastard.”

“Watch your mouth. If you say something so cheeky you’ll be killed by the Niwaka Samurai.”

The Niwaka Samurai – In the industry he was an infamous urban legend. It seemed he was a killer who specializes in killing killers, but no one had ever seen him.

“There’s no way a Niwaka Samurai exists.” Lin said in a manner as though making fun of kids believing in Santa Claus. *That sort of threat won’t work.*

“Here, your next job.” Zhang handed over a business card like throwing a frisbee to a dog. “He’s an independent detective. It seems he was asking around some strange things at our store today. I don’t know what he’s sniffing around for, but he’s an eyesore.”

There was “Representative of the Banba Detective Office, Zenji Banba” on the business card. His residence was also written there.

“Kill him tomorrow.”

Lin turned it down. “Nope.”

“Ah?”

“Until you pay up I won’t work.”

He stated as a final word and left the office. He stuffed the detective’s business card in his pass case and placed it in his breast pocket.

Thinking of returning by riding the subway, when walking from Haruyoshi to Nakasu he ran into a man on a deserted street. It was a host-like man. “Ah, excuuuse me,” he apologized with a drawn out voice.

On top of being in a bad mood in the first place he did not like the man’s lighthearted manner of speaking, so Lin gave him a punch to the man’s

stomach. It was just an outburst of anger.

The man's body dropped to the ground.

"O-ow! What the hell was that!"

He grabbed the man's collar, who shouted out why he hit him even though he apologized, and threatened in a low voice. "I could easily kill someone like you."

Taking out his specialized weapon, he turned the point of the blade to the man's forehead. The man paled and ran away at full speed while shouting, "I'll have this avenged, you better remember that!" It was the howl of a loser. That somehow cleared his head a bit.

Lin's home was in the east ward. After taking the subway from Nakasu-Kawabata and transferring at Kaizuka, he got off at Nishitetsu Kashii Station. About a five walk from there behind the JR Kashii Station was the mustard colored two story apartment building that was Lin's residence, bought from the Kakyuu Group. It had seven one room apartments with a kitchen, and the rent was about two to three million. It was a tasteless room with only a pipe bed, television, and a closet set up initially.

As he was about to take off his suit, Lin noticed his wallet was missing. Even though he put it in his pants pocket it cannot be found. Since he paid the train fare with a Nimoca card he did not realize his wallet was missing until just now. *Where did I drop it?* He thought over the activities over the today. *I shouldn't have done anything that would cause me to drop my wallet, but perhaps it was stolen? When? By whom? Actually, the man I ran into at that time. Perhaps that host had pickpocket it? Well, it's not like there was much in the wallet, but even so I can't forgive that. I should have given him a few more punches,* Lin laid down on the bed while feeling a bit of regret.

*For now, I'll just sleep. I'm strangely tired today. My eyelids are heavy.* This time it was not because of the fake eyelashes, but because he felt sleepy.

# Fourth Inning

## Top of Fourth Inning

The Fukuoka Mayor, Shotarou Harada, stayed in a suite room of a high class hotel in Tenjin that night. Since there were plans of opening a lecture in the large hall of the hotel tomorrow afternoon it seemed he decided to stay there the day before the event.

Munakata visited the mayor's room to give his periodic report. There were several bodyguards posted in the room and among them was Shinohara. The mayor was in a gown, having just entered the bath. Perhaps it was because of the election activities day-to-day but his face looks slightly tired. As expected of a former actor, he is handsome even though he is over fifty, but he feels he has gotten older all at once in these past few days.

After clearing the people out, Munakata began his report. About the removal of the detective that was sniffing around the mayor and about the woman his son Yusuke killed. The mayor having been informed of his son's wrongdoings made a more exhausted expression. "It seems that stupid son of mine is really inconveniencing me."

"Better yet, will you kill your son?" Shinohara next to them said while laughing. "Then you can rest easy."

Munakata without a moment's delay hit the back of his head. "Don't be ridiculous."

"His sickness wouldn't be cured just by killing him." The mayor laughed. It was meant to be a joke, but to Munakata he did not hear it as one. "However, it's certain we have to take measures into our own hands. I'm counting on you."

*In other words it means, no matter what do not let the public know of my son's misconducts. Additionally it also means, only you guys do something.* They were already well used to getting unreasonable demands pushed their way.

"Understood."

Bowing his head, he departed with Shinohara.

At the hotel's lobby Reiko was waiting. It was about the time to switch places as the mayor's guard. Munakata called out to her. "Good work. How was it?"

"At any rate, the woman's body has been taken care of." Reiko was making a long face. "But there's still an issue."

"What's wrong?"

"That guy was playing around with his circle of friends from university, and it seems they killed a man beating him to death. And they cleaned up the man's body together."

His head began to throb. "From one thing to another.....What is up with that kid?"

"I looked up the IDs of the students that were with them," Reiko said and handed over a paper. The three men's names and addresses were written on there. Jun Murase, Masaki Yoshida, and Tatsuya Yamashiro. They were students that attend the same university, and the three of them live nearby. All of them appeared to live in the vicinity of the school.

Shinohara cut in. "Yusuke-san's circle of friends? Then I think they're at the school right now."

"At school? Isn't it a day off today?"

"They should be in the circle's room. Yusuke-san joined the softball circle, right? Well, they're just a drinking group though. It seems they have a drinking party everyday in the room. Skipping out of lecture."

"Such nice social statuses these university students have."

"The mayor was grumbling about it. Said it costs money to have him gain school credit."

Munakata nodded. "Leave the rest to me. Reiko, I'll leave you with the boss."

Departing from Reiko, he headed to the hotel's underground parking lot. The car was parked there. Ivanov was already sitting in the backseat. Munakata got into the driver's seat, and Shinohara went into the passenger's seat.

"It seems that perverted son beat up and killed a man with his friends this time. And so we're going to go catch those friends now."



When Munakata explained their task, Ivanov said in a whisper. “I can’t accept that.”

“What of?”

“We’re killers. We’re not agents.”

Ivanov seemed to be unsatisfied. It was not like he did not understand his feelings. Even Munakata did not want to do this job. “It can’t be helped. This is also within our work.”

“Wiping a kid’s behind? They could ask for a baby sitter for that sort of thing.”

“Is that a Russian joke?” Shinohara teased, but Munakata thought the same. When he thought that he was born to do this sort of dirty work, he felt just as empty.

“Shino,” he called out to him in the passenger seat. “You go to the same university as Yusuke, right? Be on the lookout. So he doesn’t do anything else wrong.”

“That’s impossible. That guy’s in the fine arts, right? I’m in the science, so the campus is different.”

“Then switch over to the arts.”

“Please don’t ask so much from me.”

Munakata started the engine.

Leaving the hotel, just as they were passing Japan National Route 3,

“I think I have asked before,” Shinohara suddenly began speaking. “What is with that eye of yours, Munakata-san?”

By *that eye* he meant Munakata’s right eye, which was covered by an eye patch.

“You’re quite the talkative guy.” He glanced back to the back seat in the rear view mirror. Ivanov was staring out of the window intently. “You should follow Ivanov’s example a bit.”

“Isn’t it fine? Please tell me.”

It was not like he was hiding the story behind this right eye of his. He had

talked with Reiko and Ivanov before about when he blundered a previous job and lost it at that time. However, he did not feel particularly inclined in telling Shinohara about that. It was not even slightly fun talking about his lose to a cheeky newcomer.

Still facing forward he asked Shinohara back. “Do you know of the Niwaka Samurai?”

“Niwaka Samurai?” It did not seem he knew of him.

“He is an infamous urban legend in the Fukuoka killer industry.”

Munakata recalled his colleague’s words at that time.

“It seems there is a killer-killer in Fukuoka.” Eight years ago, when Munakata was still a killer to a gang. Another killer hired like him said that to him with a serious expression as though they were having a ghost story.

Shinohara had inquired. “An urban legend? Like a ghost?”

“He’s a killer-killer.”

“A killer-killer? What is that? A curse?”

“It’s a killer of killers.”

At that time his colleague said this. “It’s a killer of killers. He’s called the Niwaka Samurai. It seems he’s stupidly strong. Look, there’s that Hakata Niwaka, right? From the traditional entertainers. He wears that mask and swings around a Japanese sword, so he’s called the Niwaka Samurai. It seems no one has ever seen him though. They say anyone that has were all killed. By the terrifying killer of killers.”

Even though no one had ever seen it before, then why was it known that killer wears a Niwaka mask and even brandishes a Japanese sword? It was contradictory. Towards such a ridiculous story, at the time Munakata had laughed.

“A killer of killers who fights for justice. A killer that goes too far would be punished by the Niwaka Samurai. That’s what is said about him. Because of those rumors the killer business declined for a period of time. Although it recovered soon after.”

“Huh.”

There were those that cut their ties from the killer industry fearing the Niwaka Samurai, but in the end stay through in restraining crimes. Since the Niwaka Samurai got rather popular in the killer world the police said it was probably a false rumor spread in desperation.”

“What the heck, it was just a rumor?”

“Well about that.” Munakata made a serious face. “I saw it.”

“What did you see?”

“The Niwaka Samurai. With this eye.”

“Eh,” Shinohara’s voice locked up. “You serious?”

“This eye of mine was taken by that Niwaka Samurai.”

When the rumor began to spread that the Niwaka Samurai was just a false claim, Munakata was ordered to assassinate a certain man from his superior. The target was a killer of another organization. *Killing is killer, that’s like the Niwaka Samurai.* Munakata thought that.

The killer was a murder who took pleasure killing. He was a killer to enjoyed the act of killing itself and not for the money. He committed murder here and there quite a bit, and so it had seemed he incurred the enmities from various organizations and groups. It seemed in the worst cases he had killed even his own employers. Even in the organization Munakata was a member of had several important employees killed by him.

Hearing of the place where he would perform his next killing, Munakata got there before him. The place was a back alley with hardly any passerby in Haruyoshi. Munakata prepared his sniper rifle as always and watched the street from the roof of a low building.

Peering through the scope, he locked onto his target. He saw the form of the killer. He was in the middle of killing someone. Stabbing the person recklessly with a knife multiple times, laughing as the blood poured out. *I see, this is a man beyond my abilities. I should kill him right away.* It was then when he tried to pull the trigger.

Behind the crazed killer another man stood. At some point the man was suddenly there. He did not notice him. Immediately after that there was a scream. The head of the killer rolled on the ground. Blood vigorously spurted forth from the severed area like a water fountain. The man distanced himself nimbly as to not get sprayed in the spurt of blood.

A Japanese sword was held in the man's hand. After swiping his wrist several times to wipe off the blood on the sword, he stored the blade in the scabbard.

The man turns around. Munakata swallowed. Half of the man's upper face is covered with a mask. It is silly looking orange mask with drooping eyebrows and eyes. That was the Hakata Niwaka mask.

His colleague's words crossed his mind. *"Look, there's that Hakata Niwaka, right? From the traditional entertainers. He wears that mask and swings around a Japanese sword, so he's called the Niwaka Samurai."*

*It can't be, he thought. Is it the Niwaka Samurai? This man. Does the Niwaka Samurai actually exist?*

*What should I do?* Munakata asked himself. *Kill him? From this distance I can certainly kill him. Too bad.* The other did not notice Munakata's presence. He wanted to kill him. He thought to kill him and identify the Niwaka Samurai's identity. It was simple curiosity. It was that moment he put his finger on the trigger.

The masked man turned towards him. He felt like their eyes met. In the scope. *That guy looked in my direction. He saw me. He noticed me.* He had a hunch. His heart pounded hard. Sick sweat formed on his brow.

The masked man moved. Immediately after something flew straight at Munakata. It was a short sword. The blade ran throw his rifle at an extreme velocity. The scope broke, and the plastic pieces and glass fragments pierced Munakata's eye. He felt a sharp pain.

*I'm going to be killed, he thought. I have to run. Quickly.* Munakata ran down the stairs in haste while blood flowed from his one eye.

" – Munakata-san, it's green."

From behind him a car horn was blaring, and Munakata returned to himself

instantly. At some point the light had turned green. He quickly took off. The inside of his eye was itchy. The inside of his right eye ever since he could no longer use it on that day.

“So then, how was he? That Niwaka Samurai.” Shinohara was waiting for the continuation of his story.

“It’s a lie.” Munakata smiled. “I just lost this eye in a risky operation.”

“What the heck is that.” Shinohara was disappointed.

“There’s no way there’s a Niwaka Samurai.” Saying that as though to tell himself that, Munakata was at a loss.

### **Bottom of Fourth Inning**

*Just how long was I unconscious?* His goose-bumped skin was cold. The area was quiet. Since his eyes were blinded he could not even look at his watch. He did not know what time it was or where he was at all.

He could smell salt water. The sea was probably nearby. The rooters’ song for the Hawks suddenly came to his mind. To the sea breeze of the Genkai Sea – he feels that was the first line. He did not know where the Genkai Sea was or how large of a sea it was, but perhaps where he was right now may be at the Genkai Sea. Anxiety assaulted him, fearing of being solidified into concrete and thrown into the sea.

With his sight taken from him, Saitou was taken out of the car and forced to walk. He heard the footsteps of their feet on the ground. Suddenly, he heard the sound of shutters being lifted. It was the sound three times that of the normal house garage ones or the store ones and was slow. He felt they were being opened by a machine. They were near the sea at a building with large shutters. This place was likely a warehouse on a pier.

When he was brought into the building, this time he was sat in something like that of a chair. Still with his hands tied together, his ankles were fastened to the legs of the chair. He could not move. If he tried the chair would fall over.

And then somehow videos of claimed responsibility done by terrorists in the middle east he saw on the internet before passed his mind. In those videos the foreign hostages wore a bag over their heads and were tied to a chair with guns

pointed towards them. The terrorists would be turned to the camera and continued talking at length. Easily put it was “if you do not accept our request we will kill one hostage at a time.” It was a footage that shook the whole world. His appearance right now resembled those hostages at that time. After that the terrorist pulled the trigger on the gun and killed the hostage. Once the gun shot went off the hostage’s head slumped forward and then dropped. Even with their face hidden you would know they were dead. *Would I also be killed that way?* Imagining his circumstances, Saitou grew more anxious.

“This place is an execution area.” He heard the voice of the okama. He must have been the man wearing the worker’s clothes. “It’s useless to try to call for help.”

And then the blindfold was finally taken off. At this moment he still did not know that later he would have been glad to not have it taken off.

“You’re late, Jiro.” Another man voiced. “The promised time was at one. Now it’s past three.”

“Sorry, Mar-chan. We couldn’t find the last two at all. But we brought one of them for the time being.”

His blurry vision became clear. Saitou’s location was in a spacious warehouse with not a single thing in it. In front of him was the okama man named Jiro and a large built man who wore a black leather jacket. He did not know if he had a tan or if that was his natural color, but he was a man with dark skin and stark facial features different from that of Japanese people. A few whiskers were growing around his mouth. His head was a buzz cut with narrowly shaved lines on it. On both of his thick, log-like arms were gaudy tattoos. He was called Mar-chan by Jiro. Actually, the girl that was with him at that time cannot be found. She did not appear to be around.

“He’s José Martínez. He’s a skilled torturer. How about we give punishment starting from that boy there first.”

The one whom Jiro named was not Saitou. There was another man separated from Saitou in about three to four meters. He was wearing a stand-up collar school uniform. He looked like a high schooler. Just like Saitou, his mouth was taped shut, and he was tied to the chair.

“Don’t do unto others what you don’t want. Didn’t you learn that from your school teacher? To become a person who understands the other’s pain.”

Jiro approached the student and quietly talked to him.

“After hitting them with several punches and weakening them, you cut their tail and crush both eyes. Then lastly you cut off its head. That’s what you did to that cat. The poor cat. It suffered dearly.” Jiro stated with a cold voice that would send shivers up one’s back. It was the declaration of death. “We’ll have you get a taste of the exact same pain from here on out.”

“ – Hey, you alright? Don’t pass out now.” The man lightly tapped the high schooler’s cheek. The torture continued at length. The black man Martínez first punched the high schooler’s face. And then he continued with punches to his shoulders, chest, and stomach. It was the perfect balance of providing moderate pain and fear without killing him. After hitting him for a bit, they took an hour break. Having a quiet period of time would stir up the recipient’s fear. It was a repeat of hitting and resting. Seeing that aspect of it stirred up Saitou’s own terror at the same time. As though it was saying, *‘next is your turn. Get ready.’*

Saitou finally began to grasp the situation. This okama called Jiro was an avenger, and he appeared to be avenging the cat the high schooler butchered. And the torturer Martínez was helping to carry it out. That was the gist of it. He understood that much, but Saitou was still unsure as to the reason why he was captured. *Did I do something for something to take revenge on me? Did I incur someone’s fury? When I try to remember, I can only really think about the punch I made to the head when I was in high school. Other than that, nothing comes to mind. Surely I’m being mistaken as that university student Murase or whatever.* He could only think of that.

“You made such a docile face while you did something so dirty.” As the fifth break was ending, Martínez finally took out his tools. It looked like the next torture was coming to pass. He grasped the knife, smiling. “What should I do, Jiro? Though you said he cut off its tail, humans don’t have tails.”

“That’s true.” Jiro smiled jokingly, but his eyes were not smiling even slightly. “How about cutting off the thing in front instead?”

His nether regions hurt just imagining it.

“I guess we’ll just pass on this and go crush the eyes next?”

The high schooler cowered and shook. It seemed he wet himself, and a puddle was forming under the chair. He shook his head as he cried. The large black palms grasped the high schooler’s head. The tip of the knife Martínez held was closing in on the boy’s face. Thinking of what he was going to do, he could not watch. Saitou turned his face away and squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

He heard the boy’s silent scream. There were the muffled sounds of agony echoing throughout the warehouse. He ended up imagining it. Of what was happening to the boy right now. The image of the boy with his eyes crushed and blood flowing appeared in his mind. He felt like throwing up. *Please stop already.* Saitou felt like he was the one getting hurt. This was enough torture. Even if he wanted to cover his ears, he could not. Both of his hands were tied.

“Won’t you turn towards the camera and say sorry?” Jiro prepared a camera. The boy no longer could tell where the camera was.

“I-I’m so-rry.”

The boy appealed, crying. Tears and blood were flowing from his eyes.

“I won’t do it, I won’t do it anymore. Please forgive me. Please save me.” The boy strung the words with the best of his ability with a hoarse voice.

“Do you understand the feelings of the cat you killed that time?”

Saitou closed his eyes. He could not look at him anymore. The boy had probably nodded at Jiro’s words multiple times. He probably regretted what he had done. He certainly did something wrong. *But couldn’t they let him go?* As he was thinking that he heard the sound of something falling with a thunk. The boy’s breathing ceased. He terrifyingly opened his eyes. At Saitou’s feet the boy’s head lay. He felt nauseous, and if it were not for his mouth being sealed shut he would have thrown up.

It was then. Jiro’s cellphone rung. “Hello, I’m busy right now. ....Haa? You want to give a punch back after you were punched by a man?”

After a moment, he cut the call with a tut.



“Who was it from?”

“Yamato. Had a dispute with a guy.”

“A guy?”

“Who know. It seems like a stranger in passing. Sorry, Mar-chan. Could you go? I’ll do the rest here.”

“Okay.”

Martínez agreed and then left the warehouse. After putting his cellphone in his pocket, Jiro looked at Saitou. “Now then, next is your turn.”

He shivered.

Just what would be done to him? He could not even imagine.

Because his cellphone was ringing insistently, Lin woke up. With a sleepy voice he answered the call without looking at the caller.

“.....Who is it?”

[Hey,] it was Zhang. [Where are you right now?]

At home. “Who knows.”

*You have nothing to do with me wherever I may be. I’m not your pet,* he cursed in his mind. It seemed it was going to be quite the bad day today hearing this man’s voice first thing upon waking up.

[Kill that detective Banba sometime today. Understand?]

“I said I won’t do it.” Lin kicked back. “Until you properly pay me I won’t work.”

[You think I’ll let a joke like this go?]

*I don’t plan on joking even a little bit.* “This is a strike. It’s the worker’s just right.”

[What do you mean strike? You can just shut up and listen to what I say.]

“Don’t you act so big, you shit.”

[I’m not acting big, I am great. If I put it in your words, I have the just right to act big.]

“Shut up. Go die.” This guy pissed him off to no end. “Die painfully. And don’t get reborn a second time.”

[As always you’re a guy that doesn’t know how to use your words. If you make light of adults you’ll face the consequences.]

“Ah, right. Thank you for the warning.”

[That’s enough. Do whatever.] Lin was even more sullen at Zhang’s attitude towards him as though he was treating him like a child going through puberty.

“You don’t even have to say.” He would do as he wanted.

[If you won’t do it, then I’ll just have him killed by others. You’re not the only killer out there. There’s more than plenty in Fukuoka. Guys who are more cheap and skilled than you.]

Lin easily laughed off Zhang’s digs.

“Just try. I’ll kill those killers then.” If it comes to that, then he would thoroughly get in his way.

[Killing killers, huh.] Zhang laughed in ridicule. [You’re not the Niwaka Samurai.]

And there the call was dropped. He thought to try to sleep throughout the day today, but thanks to Zhang he woke up. The time was around seven in the morning. For the moment, he decided to take a shower.

In the bathroom he recalled what Zhang had said. *What the hell is that, “You can just shut up and listen to what I say.” No matter how much time has passed, he always thinks I’m a slave.* Lin despised the man’s cold eyes when he looked at him, as though he was seeing him as mere cattle from the bottom of his heart. *Zhang is mistaken. We’re equal. I’m the professional killer, and he’s the one giving the requests and paying: that’s their relationship. I’m not a slave anymore.*

He wanted to remind that to Zhang. He wanted to put that bastard in a pinch. Lin thought that. He felt he would have the detective Banba get killed by other killers. If that was the case, then he could kill those hitmen and get in his way. *How about I give him quite the shock.*

Coming to a decision, he had to go out immediately. He put on his earned spoils on his clean body. On top was a white chiffon blouse with a ribbon at his chest. Below was a high-waist flare skirt with black polka dots on a brown canvas. Both were spoils he took from the woman's closet he killed. The size was about right and suited him rather nicely. After wavering on whether he should wear tights or socks, he decided on long black socks that reached up to his knees. Putting on gray long boots with round studs on the heel, Lin left home.

From the JR Kashii Station, he got on the high-speed train of the Kagoshima Main Line to the third station. He arrived at Hakata Station. Walking directly from the Chikushi exit for about five minutes an old tenant building with white walls covered with coffee-like stains came into view. On the window glass on the third floor were the characters 'Banba Detective Office.' It was a five story building, and the first floor was a coin laundry and the second was a tutor dispatch office.

He headed to the third floor on the elevator. In front of the door to the Banba Detective Office a flowerpot was unnaturally left there. Picking up the pot there was a key below it. It was probably the key to the office. *Does he intend to hide it there like that? That is way too careless.* He never could understand how the Japanese were like this. *Since it's so out in the open, this couldn't be a trap right?* He was suspicious.

Even when he knocked there was no reply. *Not home then?*

Using the hidden key (totally not hidden), Lin entered into the office. The interior was not very spacious. It was about the size of Lin's room. It was divided in half by a partition. On the side of the entrance there was a steel desk, a visitor sofa and a low table, and they were rather kept clean. However the remaining half of the space was almost like a garbage room. There were thrown off clothes piled up into heaps on the sofa, and there were convenient store bentou boxes and cup ramen containers left on top of the table, and they stunk. There was also a bed, but the futon was a mess. On top of the small television set lay dust.

".....What a filthy room."

He unconsciously whispered. Luckily, there was no one else in the room but himself. No one heard that.

*Even so, where did Zenji Banba go? When would he come back?*

He thought to wait for him while watching TV for the mean time, but since the room was so scattered it was a struggle to find the TV remote.

Driving the Aisha Mini Cooper and lightly sweating at his favorite batting center was a modest hobby of Banba's. On this day as well, Banba entered the batting cage with the 100 kilometer fast pitching machine as always and swung his beloved bat. He probably already hit forty of them.

"You seem to be in good shape."

Just as he hit back the last ball, he was called out by someone. Banba turned around. On the other side of the green net he saw Shigematsu.

"Huh, Shigematsu-san. Whatcha doin' 'round here?"

"You didn't answer your phone, so I thought you'd be here." Shigematsu was carrying a bat case. "Well, I also thought of getting a bit active."

Shigematsu entered the cage next to Banba. He asked Banba while putting in a hundred yen coin into the insert slot of the machine. "How is that case? Did you find anything out?"

"Pretty decent." Banba also added another round. He planned to have it be his last.

"Is that so?"

Shigematsu took his batting stance at base. Since he was a right-handed batter he took the stance facing Banba on the other side of the net.

"I know that woman that was with the mayor was a former killer," Banba spoke to him while hitting the ball. "From Murder Inc!"

"So that was," Shigematsu also swung the bat, "it!"

"And I know who killed that detect-," he did not hit the pitched ball in the center. "ive!"

Shigematsu swung and missed. "Who is it?"

“He’s a half Russian man called Ivanov. He’s also formerly from Murder,” this time he hit the ball dead center. “Inc!”

Shigematsu made a swing and missed again. “That so?”

After all the balls were pitched, “what you are going to do next,” Shigematsu inquired.

“After droppin’ by the relaxation spa, I’ll head home.” He always did that. After picking up a sweat at the batting center, he washed it off at the bath house. That was how Banba spent his days off.

“That’s not what I mean. With the mayor.”

“Ahh, that one there,” Banba gave him a smile. “I left some there bait. All I then oughta do is what for their move down yonder.”

“Bait?”

“I went to that place in that photo. It was from a high class lookin’ club called Miroir. I persistently asked about the mayor and the man with the mayor to the store’s manager, so he probably gone and told that to the people above him.”

“I can’t believe it.” Shigematsu was wide-eyed. “That’s dangerous. Way too dangerous. They may send someone to finish you.”

There had already been one detective killed. Banba also acknowledged the danger.

“Like my office gonna to blow up ‘bout now?” Banba laughed heedlessly.

# Fifth Inning

## Top of Fifth Inning

“Let’s blow them up.”

Was what Reiko suggested when they were discussing what to do after kidnapping Murase and his friends at university and putting them to sleep.

“After all wouldn’t it be a quick way to clean up all three of them in one go? We can have it written off as an accident stupid students caused from drinking and driving.”

Munakata also was in agreement with her suggestion. If three people of the same circle and of the same university died at the same time it would intentionally leave an impact. It would be the most natural thing to do to deal with it as a car accident with the three of them together.

If it was explosions then that was Shinohara’s specialty.

“For an opportunity to test a new work of mine so quickly,” Shinohara excitedly said while setting up an explosive near the car’s fuel tank. “Still, what a strange feeling. Killing students going to the same university as me. ....Well, it’s not like I know them, and I don’t really care.”

They put the three sleeping students into the stolen vehicle. Naturally that was after they poured down large volume of alcohol from their mouths. From atop the car Ivanov was spreading around the gasoline. They planned to cause a minor explosion and set the car on fire.

When they were finishing the preparations,

“All right, let’s go. Everyone, please move away.” Shiohara started the count down in a large voice. “Three, two, one, pshh”

The moment he hit the detonation switch, the sound of an explosion went off. The gasoline caught on fire, and in a flicker of a moment the car was aflame.

“Hey, this isn’t the level of a traffic accident.” Munakata grasped his head in his hands. “Isn’t this like a terrorist bombing?”

“Ahh, sorry. It seems I put too much gunpowder.” Shinohara said without any introspection on the matter.

Munakata smacked him on the head, “idiot!”

“Isn’t this fine? The police guys will make the arrangements.” Shinohara took out his smartphone while saying that. “Hello? It’s me. Thank you for your assistance. Three people were blown up near the Nagatani dam, so can you handle this as a traffic accident? Really, my apologies as always. I’ll leave you to it. The payment will be sent to the bank account as usual. Right. Excuse me.”

Munakata and everyone else already got back into the car. While people were still absent they quickly leave the site.

“Now then, next is that perverted son’s case.” Shinohara spit out tiresomely. “What will we do? Throw him into a psychiatric hospital?”

“Even if we did that, his sickness wouldn’t be cured.” Munakata shrugged his shoulders. “Since he’s a helpless crazy bastard.”

“But that guy periodically gets urges to kill women.” Ivanov was also tired of it. “If he’s let loose, the same things will happen again.”

“If he can’t be cured, then we just have to accept it. For us to move on our own it’d be better to just prepare women. Shino, you kidnap university women and bring them in. Do it without getting caught.”

“Ehh, no way. If I do that our university will become a male campus.”

“I have an idea.” Reiko spoke up. “Do you know the Kakyuu group? They’re an organization the boss has become acquainted with recently.”

“Yeah.”

“It seems the Kakyuu group has connections to the Chinese mafia. And that mafia is famous as a human trafficking broker.”

“Human trafficking. I see. So we purchase a suitable, unrelated woman to satisfy that perverted son?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Trafficked women would not have a notification for their disappearance, so the risks that could develop in the case were low. That was as long as Yusuke did not throw away the bodies on his own before that.

“What would you do with the body? Should we just leave it to the professionals to take care of?”

“I have an idea for that too.”

Munakata nodded. “Alright. I’ll leave the clean up of the body to you then. I’ll go meet up with someone from the Kakyuu group and make some negotiations.”

Munakata made contact with the Kakyuu group soon after. He met with a Chinese man named Zhang in a high class club in Nakasu. “I want a young woman.” When he tells him of his request, Zhang agreed to it with a smile.

“That’s fine. I’ll introduce you to our broker. We were just about to have several women arrive to Japan. I thought to have them work at our pub, but I can divide them up and give some of them to you.”

“Thank you.”

“However, I have just one condition.”

Munakata furrowed his brows. “A condition?”

“Let’s have it be like the give and take concept. We will grant your wish. And in exchange I would like for you to work for us.”

“Of course, I plan to. If that is what you wish.” Co-joining on evil deeds together was a method that was difficult to build trust on. “We’ll kill anyone.”

Zhang was pleased. “Oh, you’re a great help. Actually, there’s a kid I want punished.”

“A kid, huh.” *Everyone is having difficulties with kids*, Munakata chuckled in his mind.

“It’s a killer of ours, but he made a dispute about his payment and just won’t listen to what you tell him. We don’t need a dog that bites the hand of his master.”



“So it is alright for us to kill him?”

“Yes. I would like one of your people to finish him.”

It did not seem like a trivial issue. “In that case, what is that killer’s preferred weapon? Is it a gun? Or a blade?”

“I think it’s probably a knife.” It was an ambiguous answer. *He doesn’t know the specialized weapon of the killer he employs?* Munakata was slightly surprised. “I ordered him to not use it since he’d stand out. Besides, his targets were always stabbed or cut up.”

“Then it is without a doubt a blade then.” When it comes to close combat Ivanov is the most qualified. “I have one man who specializes in close combat. He’s the strongest man even among us. I’ll give you his contact information.”

“Thank you. And here’s the broker’s contact address.”

They both exchanged numbers. The negotiations were established.

### **Bottom of Fifth Inning**

In front of Saitou’s eyes the preparations for the revenge was taking place steadily.

“Say, Murase-kun,” Jiro asked him with a metal pipe carried on his shoulder. He probably planned to use that to beat him up with. “You beat up a foreigner to death just previously right.”

Saitou shook his head in haste. He did not do anything like that. He was not Murase in the first place. He desperately tried to form words, moving his mouth sealed by the packing tape. The adhesive lessened and once the tape was half way off he raised his voice.

“Wai-wait a second!” Saitou pleaded innocence. “I didn’t do anything!”

He was not believed. “You just said it not too long ago. You really don’t know when to give up.”

“I’m really not Murase!”

“Haa?” Jiro frowned. “But you said it. That you’re Murase.”

That was true. When he was asked “are you Murase-san?” he answered with

a “yes.” However, there was a reason for that.

“Thinking of killing Murase, I sneaked into his room.”

Jiro snorted as though he said a poor excuse. “Sure, sure.”

It seemed to make him believe him he would have to give him his true name.

“I had the request to. To kill Murase. Since I’m a member of Murder Inc.”

“.....Murder Inc, you say?” Jiro grit his teeth. “Wait, what do you mean?”

“Ah, if you want proof I have it! There’s a business card in my breast pocket!”

Jiro searched inside his pocket and took out a business card just as he said there was. It was a fake business card, a necessary article for this industry. At a glance it looked like a normal business card, but heat it with a flame and the characters would disappear and other characters would surface in its place. And when the temperature decreased it returned to normal.

Jiro warmed up the card with a lighter. And he read out the characters that appear. “Murder Inc. Fukuoka Office, Takuya Itou?”

“That is a fake name, and my real name is Saitou.”

Jiro placed his hand at his mouth in surprise. “Oh my, you really are a person from Murder Inc? Isn’t that one of our precious clients?”

It seemed he finally believed him. Saitou let out a sigh of relief.

“Well now I’m very sorry. It was my mistake.” Jiro chuckled. He thought it was not an issue to be let off with just an apology, but since he then released him from his binds he decided to just forgive and forget it. And he was finally let go.

“.....W-well then, I’ll just be going now.”

He wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. He did not know where he was, but for now he would get out on the street and take a taxi home.

Jiro called out, stopping him. Both of his shoulders were grabbed and turned around suddenly.

“Y-yes. What is it?”

“If you ever want something to be avenged for, contact me. I’ll give you a

discount as an apology for this.”

He received his card. [Manager of Bar. Babylon, Jiro Tanaka] was written on it. When he warmed it with a lighter, the Bar. Babylon section changed into the characters Avenger.

It was evening by the time Banba finished his business and returned home.

With no explosion there, the Banba Detective Office was safe. In the brief moment of relief, he noticed his office was unlocked. With discretion and care, Banba opened the door. There was someone in the room. The person was sitting cross-legged on the sofa watching television. The person’s hair was long, and they wore a skirt. By looking they appeared to be a young woman. Noticing Banba, she said “welcome home” while still facing the TV. For a woman her voice was a bit low pitched.

“.....And who’d you be?” He asked for the time being.

“A killer.”

*So they really came*, he thought. It seemed they took the bait.

“Are you Zenji Banba?” After the killer glanced over at him once she snorted. “Ahh, you really have a horse-like face.”

*What a rude lass*. She was a type to say what she thought. “That hair is like a bird’s nest.” She even said that, but Banba decided to let it slide.

The killer had her gaze facing the TV. She was lost in the variety channel. Once again Banba spoke up. “Hey there, killer-san.”

“What is it?” *This is not a good time right now, so don’t talk to me*. That was her attitude.

“What you be doin’ here?”

“What do you mean what? Isn’t it obvious? I’m watching TV.”

That was not what he wanted to ask. *Why was a killer watching TV so nonchalantly?* Banba tilted his head in question. There were two reasons a person that called themselves a killer would visit Banba’s office. They would have a job for Banba, or they came to kill Banba. A killer that came to watch TV was beyond his expectations.

“You came ‘round here to watch some TV?”

“As if. Even I have a TV at my place.” The killer finally looked over to him fully. Her eyes were both raised, and she was making a face like a proud cat. “I was given the request to kill you.”

*So it really is that*, Banba felt relieved. It was strange he would feel relieved being told she came to kill him, but not grasping the intent was more unsettling.

For now to drive her away Banba reached for his bat case. At that the killer projected her right hand and stopped Banba. “Just wait. I haven’t come to kill you.”

“Ha?”

*What is up with this killer?* But she said, “I was given the request to kill you,” this time she says “I haven’t come to kill you.” It is illogical. He did not understand.

“Then what are you here for?”

“I thought to protect you.”

“Ha?”

“In truth, I had a bit of a disagreement with my employer about my payment. A certain person I meant to kill is already dead. Even so, he says I won’t get payed even the advance payment. And then he gave the order for me to kill you without any break. So I got mad, and now I’m on strike.”

“.....That is troublesome.” Just do whatever.

“Your life is being targeted. I think other killers will be sent here. I thought to beat them at their own game and cause a trouble for my employer. In other words, I’m saying I’ll be your bodyguard.”

He understood what she was saying. However, being protected by a woman was a shame for a man of Kyuushuu. “Nah.”

“Ah?”

“I can at least protect myself. Go home. I’ll get a taxi for you.”

At Banba’s words the killer’s complexion changed. Displeased, she frowned

deeply. “.....Do you know what position your in?”

The next moment the killer suddenly closed the gap. She thrust out both hands towards Banba. She was stronger than he expected. Banba was taken aback. He was pushed back onto the bed face up. Slow to respond, the killer leaned over him from above. She pinned both his hands with his knees and nimbly drew something out. It was something that took the shape of a knife. Then he felt a chill along the back of his neck. The blade was pressing against his throat. He could not move.

With a proud expression, the killer looked down at Banba. “What is this about you being able to protect yourself?”

Haven gotten in the position with his head put right in her skirt, Banba unconsciously looked away. “I can see your panties there.”

The killer was calm. “And what’s wrong with that?”

“They’re red,” Banba grimaced, “boxers.”

“They’re my victory panties.”

“.....You’re a guy?”

“What,” the killer smiled. “You just realized that?”

“I’ll tell you upfront, but it’s not like I dress as a woman to deceive people.” Since it was commonplace for people to think that, Lin told him ahead of time. “This is just a hobby.”

“A hobby?”

“I like dressing as a woman. I always thought this. Even though women can wear pants, why can’t men wear skirts?”

Lin moved both his legs and released Banba.

“Well now you understand right? Just how powerless you are. As long as you don’t say anything I don’t like you’ll be protected by me.”

*‘What a strong killer you are. It’s reassuring being protected by someone like you.’* He thought he would cry out in joy saying that, but Banba’s response was frank. “Go an’ do what you want,” he only spit out that disinterested. *Is he*

*trying to act tough? Or does he still not aware his life is in danger?*

“Ah,” Getting off the bed, Banba whispered under his breath when he opened the refrigerator. “Gone and runned out of *mentaiko*.”

Lin dropped down on the sofa and decided to continue watching TV.

Banba started talking to him. “Hey there, mister killer.”

“What is it?”

“Go buy some *mentaiko*.”

“Ah?”

“The Fukuya *mentaiko*. Regular. Uncolored.”

“Ha? Stop kidding around.”

Banba was serious. “I ain’t kiddin’.”

“Banba, was it? Why do I have to go out and buy it for you?”

“Cause it’s dangerous. My life is targeted, right? I can’t go outside.” He handed over a five thousand yen bill. “That there change is gonna be your tip.”

*It’s come to this? This shit bag*, Lin tutted and took the change. He reluctantly got up. “Just this once okay.”

“Okay.”

“Lock the door.”

“Okay.”

“Absolutely do not answer the door no matter who comes besides me.”

“Okay.”

*Does he really get it?*

From the other side of the door he heard, “The uncolored Fukuya one,” but he ignored it.

*Why does someone like me have to do this?* Lin pondered over that in his mind.

He thought to run off with the five thousand yen bill but he could not for some reason. The man’s carelessness, someone he just met, giving money to a

killer like him was in turn tugging at Lin's reasoning. It was as though he trusted him, and so he thought, 'it would be a bit pathetic if I betray him like this.'

*Mentaiko* was a Fukuoka specialty, so thinking he could buy plenty if he went to the souvenir shop Lin dropped by the shopping mall in Hakata Station. Just as he thought *mentaiko* was being sold here and there. However, there was contrarily a problem. There were too many stores selling *mentaiko*.

*What store did he say to buy it at again? I forgot. I feel the first character was fu, and the last character was ya.* He thought it over for a while, but he could not remember. In the end there was a store with a similar name to that in front of him, so Lin decided to buy it there. Finishing his shopping, he left through the station's back exit. When he was walking down an lightly dark, uncrowded street a large black man walked towards him from the front.

As they passed each other, the man grabbed Lin's arm.

*What the hell's he doing?* Before he could question that the man spoke.

"You're Xianming Lin, right?"

Being called by his name by a man he did not know, he was taken aback. And at the same time the man's large fist sunk into his stomach. He dropped to his knees on the ground while choking. If he did not have an empty stomach, he would have thrown up.

*What is he doing, so suddenly.* Lin looked up at the man and glared. *Who is this man? Someone from the same trade as me? Or maybe he's a killer hired by Zhang. Did he come here to kill me?*

"I knew you were dressed up like a woman. 'Cause I'm gay. My nether regions react when I see a man."

".....Who the hell are you?" Lin scowled at the grinning man. "Don't look at me with those creepy eyes."

"That's a nice face. Saucy kids who are ignorant to the ways of the world are my favorite."

*What kind of attack will be next?* Lin fixed his stance and put up his guard. With an expression baring vigilance, he waited for his opponent's move.

However, the man turned around. "See you."

"Ha?" This was a disappointment to Lin as well. He thoughtlessly called out to him. "Wa-wait a second. Where are you going?"

"What do you mean where, I'm going back. With this my job is done."

He did not follow. "Aren't you a killer hired by Zhang?"

The man tilted his head while brushing the hairs around his mouth. "Zhang? Who's that? I was hired by an avenger."

"Avenger?" He had heard it from rumors.

"You punched a man who's a host yesterday, right? That guy was super pissed, and he wouldn't be satisfied without giving back a punch. Don't you think he should have done it himself then? He's an unbelievable loser."

He remembered. It was the man who pickpocketed his wallet. *Actually, that man said, "I'll have this avenged" or something.*

"You won't kill me?"

"Avengers have a contraband on excessive offense. If someone crushes an eye, then they crush their eye. They can't do more than that. And so having punched you my job is finished. Besides, I'm not a killer in the first place. I'm just a torturer. Here is my card. If there's someone you want tortured, give me a call anytime."

He told him, and on the business card he received it said 'Chiropractor José Martínez.' He warmed it up with a lighter as a test. The characters chiropractor turned into torturer.

"Ahh, that's right. I'll give you a warning." As he was leaving Martínez said, "Throw away the receipt immediately."

*The receipt?* He did not understand what that meant at all.

When Lin got back the door to the Banba Detective Office was unlocked. *Even though I told him to lock it.* He entered, exasperated.

"Welcome back."

Banba was watching TV. He was watching the screen as though eating into it.



It was the exact opposite situation from a while ago.

“You was late.”

“I was attacked. By a man.” *It was quite the trouble*, he raised his voice.

“What!?” Banba turned out swiftly. “Is it alright!?”

“.....It’s nothing, I’m fine. I was just hit once.”

“Not you, what about the *mentaiko*!?”

“You’re not concerned for me!?” He threw the bag with the *mentaiko* in it at Banba.

“Ow!” The bag hit Banba square in the face. Checking the contents of the bag, Banba grew sullen. “Ah, ain’t this here Fukusaya *mentaiko*?!”

“What’s the big deal with that?”

“I done said to go buy some Fukuya *mentaiko* though.”

“Stop your complaining. Aren’t both of them the same?” Whether there was a *sa* in the name or not, it was not a huge error.

Banba was pouting. “You’d say the names Itou-san and Saitou-san are also the same then?”

“Ahh, you’re annoying.” Even though he went out and bought it, he would not even say a word of thanks. It pissed him off.

Banba turned his gaze back to the TV again. He appeared to be watching the relay of a professional baseball game. He did not have any interest in baseball, but he had nothing else to do, so Lin also sat next to him and decided to watch the game. It was just passing boring time.

It was a game with the Hawks versus the Carps. Each time the batter swung the bat or the pitcher threw the ball Banba flipped between being joyous and being sorrowful. Lin could not understand what was so interesting in baseball at all.

With the Carps in the lead, the game was approaching the end. Top of the ninth inning, it was the Hawk’s offense. Two outs. The score was four to five. The point difference was by one point. The set up was with runners on second

and third base. At plate was player number eight, the catcher. From inside the TV, he heard the disappointed voice of the announcer as though he had given up. [The batting average this season is 19.5%, the BA/RISP is 18%. At such a big stage, could he hit those numbers?]

The batter swung twice, but both were clumsy misses. *Seems it's hopeless*, Lin thought. Even a novice would know from watching. There was no way he could hit.

[The count is one ball and two strikes. They've been cornered.]

"Please hit," Banba was watching as though in prayer. *I see, since the team he supports is losing he was so cross.*

There was the call for one more pitch raising from the audience.

"Alright, they're going to lose anyway." He thoughtlessly whispered.

"You don't know that." Banba objected, flaring his nostrils. "You don't know what is gonna happen 'til the end."

The pitcher made his throw. It was a curve ball. The batter's bat would miss. *Yes, with three strikes. It would be game set.*

So he thought.

The opponent's catcher missed the ball. Having turned behind, the ball pitilessly rolled far away.

[Ahh, this is an error! The catcher bounced the ball off!] The broadcaster's voice boomed in excitement. [During this time the runner on third is coming home! It's a tie! Furthermore, furthermore, the runner on second kicked off to third! The ball won't make it!]

"Oh? Ohh!" Banba clasped his hands. He was enjoying himself like an excited gorilla. "Whooa! Whooooa!"

[Now what is this!] The voice of the announcer was close to a yell. [That was an unbelievable safe two runs! It was a turn-around for the Hawks!]

"Yess! They done it!" Banba also yelled. "They done it! Gosh darn it! Woo-hoo!" *So annoying.*

[No way. For something like this to happen.] The commentator was also surprised.

He was not well acquainted with the rules of baseball, but he managed to understand from the broadcaster's tension.

After that the relief pitcher gave up with three strikes in a row, and so it was a game set. Protecting their one point difference, the team Banba supported had obtained victory.

"Ahh, that there was quite some luck." Banba was in a good mood. "You don't know what will go down in baseball when there's two outs and three strikes in the ninth inning."

Because of the prolonged relay, his beloved drama he watched every week without fail started thirty minutes late. This was why he hated baseball.

Banba smiled and said as though he just remembered, "Ah, thank you. For buying the *mentaiko*."

*Really, just now?*

Lin ignored him and watched the TV. "I wanted to eat one from a different store once in a while. The Fukusaya was darn good too. The flavor had some spunk there."

He was making a comment that was completely opposite from before. He just gave complaints about Itou-san and Saitou-san. *What a man with an attitude.*

"Don't talk with me. I can't hear the TV." He increased the volume with the remote.

"You watch that kinda thing? That's unexpected." Without paying mind to the warning, Banba started chatting with him. Right about now it was at a scene with a man and woman embracing one another. "Even though you're a killer, you like this here love drama?"

"Not really. It's not like that. ....Since I do this kind of work, I want to have a glimpse into normal human life once in a while."

*Though you probably wouldn't get it*, he ridiculed, yet Banba shook his head. "Nah, I got it. That feeling."

“How so?”

“This sort of work builds up stress. Actually, whatcha think about doing some sports? I’m in an amateur baseball team. Would you join?”

“You stupid? Who would.”

“You ain’t no fun.”

Banba stood up and started boiling water on a portable stove. It looked like he was preparing dinner.

“You hungry?”

“Not really.” He was actually hungry.

“I’m cookin’ dinner. You want a bite?”

“Don’t need it.”

Banba took out two cup ramen from inside the cupboard and poured it into the hot water. Then, he placed one of them with disposable chopsticks in front of Lin. “Alrighty, here. Eat up.”

“I hate tonkotsu ramen. It’s too greasy, and it makes my stomach upset.”

“.....I gone and made it for you though.”

Banba frowned. *Though he said he made it, didn’t he only just put it in hot water? How condescending.*

When he reached out for the disposable chopsticks, Banba smiled, “What, so you will eat it.”

“If I don’t then it’ll be a waste, right. It’s principle to not waste food.”

“That’s admirable.”

“Hey,” he asked suddenly. “Have you ever eaten food fallen on the ground before?”

Banba shook his head. “Nadda.”

“Probably not.”

He remembered the past. The village Lin lived in was poor. He gathered and ate the food scrapes others always threw away. They were unpleasant

memories.

He thought this country was peaceful. No one ate food fallen onto the street. Since they did not throw away the scrapes, food never was left behind. They preferred it clean here. He thought he rather liked that about Japanese people.

“Thank you for the meal.” Banba said as he clasped both his hands together.

Lin also did the same. “Thank you for the meal.”

*Actually*, he thought. This may be the first time in his life that he was given anything from another person besides money. He never had been given something to eat by someone before now. Actually being given food in a proper bowl was also a first for him.

He slurped the miso in one go. The rich flavor spread throughout his mouth.

*Ah, this is delicious.*

He meant to have whispered that to himself in his mind, but he must have accidentally let it slip past his mouth. “It’s good ain’t it?” Banba smiled proudly.

It was a day where a lot of things happened. When he went to kill someone, he got captured by an avenger. He was dangerously close to being beaten to death. Saitou was exhausted in mind and body.

He decided to stay at a business hotel in Tenjin during this time until he settled on a new place of residence for him. After returning to the hotel by taxi, Saitou slept like the dead. By the time he noticed, it was already night. He had three missed calls on his cellphone. All were from his superior at the Murder Inc Fukuoka Branch.

*Crap*, he thought. Since he was in danger he completely forgot about his job. Even though he was supposed to kill Jun Murase, it was already way past the time table. Just like the time in Tokyo headquarters he was unable to harden his resolve to go through with murder, had continued to hesitate, and now it had passed the time limit. He failed again. This time he would be killed by the company.

While he was bracing his head wondering what to do, his phone rung again. This was also probably from his superior.

Fearfully he answered the call. “.....Hello?”

[Ah, I finally go through.] His superior’s voice was cheerful. [Well, Saitou-kun, you done great.]

“Eh?”

He thought he had misheard. *He did great? It was not a “now you’ve done it?”*

[I heard from headquarters you was a problem employee who couldn’t do the job at all, yet you was punctual.]

“Um.....What are you talking about?” He did not understand at all.

[You killed that university student in an accident, right?]

“Yes?”

[The client is very pleased. Your payment as been already deposited. Double check it.]

His superior cut the call.

*Wait a second. What is the meaning of this?*

He opened his laptop in a haste and searched the Fukuoka local news. On the net a news story was posted saying three university students got into an accident from drunk driving and died. Jun Murase’s name was there among the university students who died.

*Hey, wait. You’re kidding me. Murase is dead? What the heck. Is it a coincidence? Could something so lucky happen?*

*Perhaps,* he suddenly considered. The man’s face from yesterday came to his mind. The avenger Jiro. *Could this be their work?*

Saitou could not contain himself. He called the number on the business card on a whim.

[Hello, this is Bar. Babylon.] The man answered. It was Jiro’s voice.

“Ah, um, is this Jiro-san? It’s me. Saitou.”

[Oh my, Saitou-chan? Sorry about yesterday.]

Getting to the point, he asked. “Um, I heard that Jun Murase died in an

accident, but by chance did you guys kill him?”

[Well, about that.] Jiro laughed. [It wasn't us.]

“.....So then did they really die in an accident?”

[I wonder about that.] Jiro said profoundly.

“Eh?”

[We took a request to kill the three students who died in the accident. All three of them.]

*I wonder if it's just a mere coincidence,* Jiro muttered. And there the call was dropped.

*This is a coincidence? There's no way. Someone had to have killed them and then show cased it as an accident for sure.*

He felt uneasy about it. However, thanks to this he was saved. Saitou did not play a part in it directly, but his target died. Furthermore, he got payment for it. Without doing anything and without committing any crimes, he only received the money. It was the best outcome. He felt like gaining a point with a walk when hit by a pitched ball after three consecutive foul balls.

After Saitou left the hotel, he headed to the convenience store. It was to make sure whether he actually was deposited his payment or not. In the balance inquiry, Satiou felt he was going to lose his footing from the shock of the displayed amount on the ATM screen. An amount more than that of a salary man's annual income around his age group was deposited in there. Actually, he had heard that in the case of killing the target and presenting it as an accident or a suicide the company would give a special reward, but for there to be this much.

Since he was now completely awake, Saitou went into the city thinking of going out to eat. When he was wandering around the entertainment district he was called out in front of the Nakasu information center.

“You there young sir, how about it? I'll introduce you to a nice venue!”

He unconsciously halted in his path by the pleasant voice of the guide wearing a blue jacket. Since he came all the way to Fukuoka, what would he do if he did

not enjoy himself in Nakasu. Although he came to an amusement park, it seemed he could not get on the roller coaster. He just got money, so there was no harm having fun for a night. Saitou grinned.

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#### Translation Notes:

1. The Ban is Banba's name is written with the character *horse* (馬), hence Lin's comment about his face.
2. Mentaiko – pollack roe. These are genuinely expensive.
3. [Tonkotsu ramen](#) – A ramen dish that originated from Fukuoka. It's a specialty in Fukuoka and the Kyushuu island. In Fukuoka it is commonly referred to just Hakata ramen as well. The broth is based on pork bones (tonkotsu)



# Sixth Inning

## Top of Sixth Inning

Yusuke Harada made the young woman they purchased from the human trafficking broker useless in one night. *Like this no matter how many women are out there in the world it wouldn't be enough*, Munakata clicked his tongue.

[Munakata-san, I finished.] He had that call, and when he went to his residence the woman was dead on top of the bed. Her hands and legs were tied. *Was she killed after she was violated, or was she violated after she was killed?* He did not know which, but he did not want to know. Either way, it was apparent this man's desire could not be sated unless he killed a woman.

"You satisfied?"

When he asked, Yusuke chuckled. "Well, for a bit anyway."

Past three o'clock late in the night, he stuffed the woman's body into a large suit case and packed it into the trunk of the car. He then headed to the Tenjin business hotel. Reiko was waiting for him in room 602. Her hair was styled like a hostess's, and she was wearing a slightly exposing, high priced one piece dress.

The room had a single bed, and a man he did not know was asleep on the bed. He was in his underwear.

"Who is this man?"

"Don't know. I caught him quite drunk in Nakasu. His license said he's a Takuya Itou."

Reiko asked the dead drunk man out and probably got in the room that way. And then she put him to sleep. She excelled at using drugs.

"Did you bring the woman's body?"

"Yeah, in here." He opened the trunk. Just as he said to Reiko he brought the woman Yusuke finished playing with.

Seeing the folded, rigid body, Reiko scowled. ".....That man is the worst."

"So, what are we going to do? With this body."

“We’ll have it rest here.” Reiko pointed to the bed. “We’ll have him bear the crimes. All of the rape incidents that perverted son caused.”

### **Bottom of Sixth Inning**

His head was heavy. It was incredibly heavy. It felt like his brain tissue had turned into lead.

When he opened his eyes, Saitou was on a bed in a hotel. Right now it was six o’clock on his digital watch. He must have drank too much yesterday. He did not have any memory in the middle of it. His body was still shaky; apparently he was still not sober.

And suddenly something like the shape of a human arm grazed by his vision. Gazing over, a woman was asleep next to him. *It can’t be. No, no, no. There’s no way.* To have slept with a woman he did not know for a night. He did not remember any of it.

*Just who is this woman?* Peering at her face, Saitou gave a scream. The woman’s eyes were open wide. She was dead.

“W-what-”

*How did this happen? Who is this woman? Actually, why is she dead?* He did not remember. He could not remember. He was confused.

He instantly became sober. Jumping off the bed, Saitou checked his surroundings. He was in his underwear. The clothes he wore were scattered throughout the room. He fished through his jacket pocket. In there were his wallet and cellphone. There were also four business cards in there. Three were from clubs in Nakasu, and the other he received from Jiro the day before. He did remember visiting those clubs, but he did not recall anything after that. *Remember, you gotta remember it.* He desperately put his throbbing mind to work.

He was super drunk last night. He was unable to walk, and he hunched over in the street. Gradually the events of the night before come back to him. Actually after that he felt he was called out by someone. “Are you alright?” She said. She looked like a hostess at a glance. She was an elegant and pretty woman. He was told she would take the taxi with him, and she brought him up to the hotel

room. After that he lost consciousness. Perhaps he brought the woman to the hotel due to his momentum under the influence. *And then I killed her? Whoa, there's no way, right?* He got frightened.

He glanced over at the woman's face. *Huh*, Saitou tilted his head. No. *It's not this woman. Her face is quite different from the woman who brought me here.* It did not seem it was an issue with makeup. Both were beautiful people, but their features were different. The woman he met last night had a long face, but this woman had a round face.

Besides, she was quite young. She still might not be even in her twenties. The woman last night seemed more adult-like. *Then who is this woman? Where did she come from and why is she dead here?* He only grew more confused. Saitou was dumbfounded. Though right now he thought he could not stay here. At this rate he would be caught as a murderer. He had to get out of here fast. Putting his clothes on in a hurry, Saitou fled from the hotel with his shoes in one hand.

The following day, while looking down on the killer curled up sleeping like a cat on top of the sofa in the Banba Detective Office, Banba gave a bitter smile. *What type of bodyguard is this? He's sleepin' deeply.*

If he woke up it will be troublesome again. He would persistently question him on where he was going and could end up going with him. So while he had the chance Banba headed out. Where he was heading towards was the internet cafe Enokida staying in.

When Banba came in Enokida was just hacking into the home page of the Meteorological Agency. He was playing around changing the weather reports in Okinawa all to "snow" for a week. He was probably on his break right now. Just what was so fun about it was lost to Banba.

"Ah, Banba-san." Giving a glance towards Banba, Enokida said cheerfully. "You were still alive."

"Somehow." He sighed. "A killer dropped by my place though."

"Whoaa, that's tough. What are the casualties?"

"Took a blow to my food supply."

"Your food supply? Was it a starvation tactic?"

“I’m completely out. He’s a fella who eats. Two bowls of ramen and three cups of rice. I’m out of the *mentaiko* we bought yesterday.”

“.....What did that killer come to do?”

“He got the request to kill me, but seems he gone and had a dispute with his employer on money so he came here to protect me. He’s sleepin’ at my place right ‘bout now.”

“Sleeping? Not you put him to sleep?”

“Sleepin’. Fast asleep.”

“Just who is he?”

“I thought to have you look that up.”

“Ahh, I see. So that’s it. What kind of guy is he?”

“He’s still young. He’s a man but dresses like a woman.”

“Ah,” Enokida raised his voice as though he remembered something. “I may know that killer.”

As expected. *He’s a fella that knows anything*, he admired to himself.

“Isn’t this him?” Enokida took out the data concerning the man. His name was Xianming Lin and his hobby was cross dressing.

“Noriaki Hayashi?”

“Xianming Lin. In official documents he’s Taiwanese, but it seems he was born in a farm village in China originally. There was a man looking for this person just a little while ago. I just looked him up.”

Actually that killer had said yesterday that he was attacked by a man on his way home when he went to buy the *mentaiko*.

“You know quite a bit. Even the cross dressin’.”

“It’s because there was a receipt for makeup in his wallet. Like lipstick and fake eyelashes.”

“So how about his employer?”

“Who knows. I don’t know to that extent. Shall I look it up?”

“Nah. I’m gonna ask the person himself.”

Handing over his payment, Banba left.

When he got back to the office,

“Welcome home.”

A voice called out to him. Lin still remained.

“I’m home.”

“A guest came by.”

“A guest?” Is it a client for a job?

“Over there,” Lin pointed with his chin. On the other side of the partition was a man in black clothes. His arms and legs were both tied by a long extension cord, and blood was flowing from his nose. It was likely this man was a killer that came to kill Banba and was beaten by Lin. He could imagine it with ease.

“Thank you for being so hospitable.”

“Should I have brought out tea?”

Lin laughed.

“Say, what should we do with this guy? Kill him? How about we cut off his head and send it to his employer? With the refrigerated courier service.”

The killer was frightened. He must not be well acquainted with this sort of job.

“Let the fella go.”

When Banba said that Lin made a face like a child that had his toy taken away. Reluctantly he unraveled the extension cord around his feet. And then he got close to the killer’s face and threatened, “Tell him. That it’s useless doing this. Hurry and pay up.”

By “him” he probably meant Lin’s employer. It seemed it was true they had a dispute about payment.

After the killer ran off, Banba went straight for the topic at hand. “By the way, Xianming Lin-kun.”

Suddenly being called by his name, Lin's eyes widened. "Why do you know my name?"

"Looked it up, I did."

"Just when I wondered where you ran off to you went and looked up something so pointless?"

"There are a lot of things I wanna ask you, but will you answer honestly?"

"Depends on the question." Lin answered back bluntly.

Banba started his questioning without concern. "Why did you become a killer?"

"It's for money. Money. Of course it's money."

"Money, huh....." With how hungry he was yesterday he did not think he lived an extravagant life. "By chance do you have debt?"

"Well, something like that."

Then this made it fast.

"If I said I'd pay that debt in exchange, what you'd ya do?"

Lin's expression turned serious. "What do you mean?"

"Do a trade with me."

"A trade?"

"I'll pay the price you give for the information you have."

*How about it?* He asked. Lin fell silent. He was probably calculating the advantages and disadvantages in his head. After a while he spoke. "If I get another 5,000,000 then I'll be free."

"5,000,000. Is cash fine?" Banba opened a safe in the corner of the room and took out five stacks of bills. It was the money he received from Shigematsu. He piles up the 5,000,000 yen in front of Lin. After Lin confirmed each stack, Lin nodded. Negotiations were complete.

"First, can you introduce yourself?"

Lin snorted. "You know already. Since you looked it up."

“Your age?”

“Nineteen.”

“Where are you employed?”

“The Kakyuu Group.”

“The kah-kew group?” A gang organization? It was a name he did not hear before.

“It’s a Yakuza group excommunicated from the Chinese mafia family. It’s that so-called multinational mafia.”

“What is the Kakyuu Group’s main source of income? Drugs? Weapons?”

“Humans.”

“I got ya; human trafficking, that right?”

“I’m not involved with that so I don’t know the specifics. I just receive requests and kill them. And only repeating that do I receive money.”

He moved on to the next question. “When did you become a killer?”

“I was hired by the Kakyuu Group two years ago. I underwent training since I was nine.”

“Training?”

“The objective of human trafficking is not just for internal organs. They gather a lot of kids, discipline them and make them into soldiers or killers.”

“That means you was one of those that gone through it?”

“That’s right. The Kakyuu group raise the organization’s killers out of their own expense.”

“Your Japanese is good. Where did you learn it?”

“I was forced to learn it. I took classes for Japanese and English in training. Besides I lived in Japan for two years and use Japanese not just within the group.”

“Then you converse with people of the group?”

“People from one part. I’ve gone in and out of the office before.”

“Last question.” He took out the photo from inside his desk. “Do you know the man in this photo?”

It was the photo of mayor Harada he received from Shigematsu. When he pointed to the skin-headed man that was only shown from the back,

“This guy,” Lin’s eyes widened largely. After that he glared at the photo as though he was looking at a pest. “It’s Zhang.”

“Zhang?” So he was an acquaintance then.

“It’s my employer. He’s a subordinate of the Kakyuu Group. He’s wearing a poor taste of a suit, right? He’s always like that.”

“There ain’t no mistake it’s that man?”

“Yeah, without a doubt. Since I’ve always thought to someday pierce a knife into the back of his head like this.”

*I see*, Banba hummed. It would be natural to be killed if he possessed the photo of the secret meeting between the new mafia and the mayor. With this he had grasped a great deal of information.

Lin was in a great mood, having earned money through unthinkable means. Now there was no need to heed Zhang’s orders. Meaning it was no longer necessary to receive payment from Zhang, and there was no reason to protect the strange detective Banba. Then all he had to do was pay back the debt right away and return to his country. His family was also waiting for him.

When he left the office,

“If there is any trouble, you can always give a call. I’ll be of help.”

Banba told him, and he was given his business card. It was the business card written with [Representative of the Banba Detective Office, Zenji Banba.] It was the exact same as the one he received from Zhang.

“Don’t need it.” Lin did not take it. He already had that business card and even if he did not have it he did not need it.

“Dontcha be so hesitant and just take it.”

“I’m not being hesitant. I’m saying I won’t have anything for me to be saved



by you.”

“I don’t get you.” Saying nothing but exclamations, Banba spread out both his hands. “Whatcha reckon’ a killer needs?”

“Haa?” What a killer needs? It was obvious. “Of course that’d be strength.”

“No, that ain’t it.” Banba shrugged his shoulders. “Here’s a hint. It’s somethin’ needed in baseball too.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Lin spit out and turned his back to Banba. He hated riddles.

He decided upon returning home to change into a suit and head towards Zhang’s office. He got on the train of the Kagoshima main line heading towards Kokura from Hakata station, and just as he got off at Kashii station he got a call. It was from Zhang.

[Did you kill the detective?]

“No,” Lin did not suppress his laugh. “I won’t be taking any more jobs from you.”

[What’s this now? Aren’t you in quite the good mood.]

“I got 5,000,000. Now the debt is fully payed. I’m a completely free person now.”

[Huh, is that it?] Zhang’s response was less than he expected. [With your attitude it seems you haven’t seen the news yet.]

“News?” *What is he talking about?* “When you say news, what kind of news?”

[Well whatever. You’d be happier not knowing.]

And there the call was dropped.

*What does that man want to say?* Lin tilted his head in confusion.

Once returning home, Lin turned on his TV right away. It was a local news program, and the announcer was reading off a script. There was an accident caused by drunk driving, a high schooler’s disappearance, and after that –

[The next news. This morning the body of a woman was found in a hotel in Fukuoka City. It has been discovered that the identity of the body is the Chinese

exchange student in Fukuoka City, Qiaomei Lin.]

“Eh”

Lin’s eyes widened.

“Qiaomei.” It was his younger sister’s name. “There’s no way.”

*No, it can’t be. That’s not possible.* He hastily called Zhang. His hands shook.

Zhang answered immediately. [I thought it was about time you would give a call.]

“What’s the meaning of this. This Qiaomei Lin -”

[It is your genuine, little sister.]

“Th-that can’t be.....Why is Qiaomei in Japan?”

[Just like you it is because through human trafficking. She was bought by an abnormally perverted kid and made a toy of.]

“He bought Qiaomei?” Lin raised his voice. “Didn’t you promise not to touch my family?!”

[Are you an idiot? You think a person who does not follow the law could keep a promise?]

His body flared up in a rage. He was beyond rotten.

“Who,” he forced out while crushing down his anger. “Who bought Qiaomei?”

[I can’t say that. It’d be a complication of confidentiality.]

“I’ll kill him. I’m going to kill him.” Lin bore his teeth and yelled. “You and the bastard that did this to Qiaomei; I’m going to kill all of you.”

[Ahh, I’ll tell you one other thing.] Zhang warded it off with a nonchalant voice. [Your mother died five years ago from illness. So about the rest of the 1,000,000 you’ve conscientiously been saving up every month, all of that went into our organization’s pockets.]

He had no words to reply back with.

[I warned you about it though. That if you make light of adults you’ll face the consequences.]

“.....Just you wait there; I’m going to go kill you now.” He cut the call. He took a taxi while still wearing women’s clothing and headed up to Haruyoshi. When he arrived at the targeted multi-tenant building, Lin got out of the car, tossing a ten-thousand bill to the driver after saying he did not need any change, and then ran up the building’s stairs. He climbed to the fourth floor as his hurried heels clicked off them and then with the same vigorousness he rushed into the office.

In the office there were five men wearing business suits. They were Zhang’s lackeys. They were lounging back idly talking on the sofa. He did not see Zhang. He was probably in the center room.

At the entrance of Lin in woman’s clothing, the lackeys were taken aback. They squinted, wondering who this woman was. One of them approached Lin while giving a bitter smile.

“What’s wrong miss? Have you mistaken the wrong floor? If you were looking for a beauty salon, it’s the second floor.”

Lin made his move without answering back to the man’s words. Taking out his hidden knife, he slit open the man’s throat. Blood sprayed forth and stained Lin’s blouse red.

“Who the hell are you?!” The men yell. “What are you doing?!”

Each of the men reached for their pockets. They were probably going to take out their hand guns. In that interval, he approached another man and slashed his stomach. He took the gun from the man. It was a Chinese model gun with a suppressor attached and a star mark carved into the grip. While using the man’s body as a shield he faced the remaining three men and shot. It had been a while since he used a gun, but he was far superior. He hit the first two in the head and the last one in the heart.

The office’s walls and floors, and his own clothes, were all covered in blood. He kicked open the door to the next room with that bloodstained appearance. And in there was indeed Zhang. He appeared to have been waiting for Lin to arrive. There was no speck of worry on his face. Just as always he was reclined against the desk with a chair and was smoking a cigar. *How easygoing. Even though he is going to be killed now.*

With a knife in his left hand and a gun in his right hand, Lin slowly walked towards Zhang. "You're rather calm."

Looking at Lin, Zhang laughed as though to make a fool of him. "What is that get-up? Did you plan to disguise yourself or something?"

"Who was it?" He thrust the barrel of the gun at Zhang's forehead and demanded. "Who bought Qiaomei?"

"Who knows." Zhang's composure did not crumble.

"You don't plan to say who?"

"Yeah."

"Then die." *Atone her with your death.*

"You can't. I won't be killed by you."

"Ha, are you an idiot? You think I have any feelings towards you? You are special."

"I don't mean that. You cannot kill me. After all, you're not a killer."

"What the hell are you saying?" *I'm not a killer, he says? No matter how you look at it from how I look now I'm a killer.*

"You're not a killer. You're just a murderer. The professional killers say that about that person doing things like that. Remember that before you die."

*That person? Who is he is referring to?*

Zhang's gaze moved to behind Lin. He was taken aback. When he turned around there was a wall. When he looked closer it is a person. At some point the man was behind Lin. He was an incredibly large man. He thought he was like the Frankenstein monster in movies. *Is this man also a killer hired by Zhang?*

The man caught Lin off guard. His arm was hit. The hand gun fell to the floor from his palm.

Zhang addressed the man, "I leave the rest to you," and went to leave the room calmly.

"Stop right there, you bastard!"

He reached towards Zhang, but he was pulled by the hair by the man from behind. His head was thrown back. The man's right hand came around right in front of him, and he put his forearm around his neck.

"Ah, gah"

He was losing breath. He moved the knife in his left hand to his dominant hand. He pierced the blade into the man's arms strangling him. The man was calm. He did not let out a scream nor a groan.

"It's useless. Knives don't work against me." The man said with a small intonation of a voice.

"Wh-why -" *Why does it not work?*

"What a killer needs the most is a durable body." The large man spoke, whispering into Lin's ears. "Killers have to be able to kill someone no matter the situation. Even if, for instance, there's a place where you cannot bring in a weapon."

"Kah, ha." It was hard to breathe.

"Being able to fight with just the body will be a killer's status. And so I build up my body. To be able to kill my opponent with just this arm. To be able to bear any attack."

*Right now I have to fix my stance.* Lin pulled out his knife from the man's arm once. This time he tried to aim for a vital area and raised it towards his opponent's throat. The man grabbed Lin's wrist. He tightly held Lin's fist grasping the knife from above and increased his force on it. He then tried to twist it in the opposite direction. Just as he thought he was going to break his arm, he was mistaken. The tip of the knife was facing towards his own stomach. Since the man's strength was fairly strong he could not release the knife nor could he turn away from its trajectory.

The knife he was holding cuts into his side, and Lin gave a scream. "Ugwaah"

In the time his body shook in pain, the man attacked from the front. He pushed him against the wall and grabbed Lin's thin neck with both hands. The man's fingers dug into his throat. His bronchial tubes and veins were being pressed on; he could not breathe. It hurt.

Without oxygen circulating in his brain, he was getting dazed. Suddenly, Zhang's words passed through his mind.

– You're not a killer. You're just a murderer.

He felt like throwing up. *What the hell is that? I'm not a killer? No. I'm a genuine, professional killer. I'm not a slave or a dog. I'm a pro. I'm a professional killer.*

Lin whispered that numerous times over in his head.

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#### Translation Notes:

Lin's name is written as 林憲明. I'd say Banba read Xianming really off (I at least would have guessed kenmei). And *hayashi* is the kun-reading for 林, but it can also be read as "*rin*" for its on-reading. "*Rin*" is also actually the phonetic name in Japanese for Lin.

# Seventh Inning

## Top of Seventh Inning

About thirty minutes earlier there was a call from Zhang to Ivanov's cell phone. Zhang's orders were, "right now a killer called Lin is coming to the office, so kill him." The opponent appeared to have been completely caught by Zhang's trap. He thought for him to appear unconcerned in the enemy's territory that he is a shallow guy. From the way he easily took the provocation, he is probably a hasty and quick-tempered person. It is not fitting for a killer.

When Ivanov arrived at the Kakyuu group's office, inside the room was already a mess. As though he brandished a brush of red paint, blood stains were splattered on the walls and floors. The killer in question was talking with Zhang in the adjacent room. Stepping over the fallen bodies, Ivanov also entered the next room.

The killer Lin was still a child. He heard he was a man, but he was dressed as a woman. His figure was slim, and he seemed powerless. It was simple to wring his neck.

Trying to strangle him, he added more force in his fingers. His thumb on his trachea and his index fingers and his middle fingers on his carotid artery and jugular veins each applied pressure. Lin was moving his mouth like a goldfish, searching for air. His white face turned more pale and his eyes also became hollow.

*Just a little more*, it was when he thought that. Ivanov noticed it. That Lin's mouth was repeating systematic movements.

*It can't be. Is he saying something? Under these circumstances?* Ivanov observed the movement of Lin's lips closely. He knew how to read lips well. At first his lips were round. It was "oh." The next his tongue stuck out a bit. *Is it "reh?"* Then his chin dropped a little. It was "wah." He closed his mouth, and he moved his lips for a pop. "*Poo, huh*." The curled tongue protruded out; it looked like a "roh." At last, it opened wide. It was "dah."

*O-re wa pu-ro da. I am a pro.* That was certainly what this man was saying.

That was how his lips moved. Countless times, on repetition as though to appeal it.

Lin's lips closed together. Just when he thought he finally died, Lin withstood the pain and showed his last ditch effort. He took out another knife from somewhere and pierced it into Ivanov's forearm that was strangling him. It was a knife with an odd shape like that of round cylinder for a handle.

"I'm saying it's useless."

Due to him building up his body, this much pain was nothing. He should have said that just previously. He was a killer that did not learn.

At that moment, the edges of Lin's lips lifted up. Ivanov could not believe his eyes. This man was smiling. He was smiling just as he was on the verge of death. This guy was mad.

Lin did not stop his movements. When he removed the knife, he then brandished it, holding it out straight at Ivanov. The tip of the knife was facing his way. It was a strange stance having his arm extended out and pointing the knife at Ivanov. It was difficult understanding just what he was trying to do.

Yet Lin was still smiling. And then his lips moved again. This time it was different movements than before. Ivanov read his lips' movements once more. It all was made of ten characters. A-ta-ma wa, ki-ta-e-ru, ka – *Is your head built up?*

*Is my head built up? Head? Built up? What does that mean?*

Lin grasped the guard of the knife with his index finger. It was like the stance of brandishing a gun. *It can't be*, he thought. When he realized it, it was already too late. Lin already pulled it.

The sound of a gun went off.

A gun shell flew out of nowhere and struck right in the middle of Ivanov's forehead. Both his hands drop from Lin's neck, and his body fell backwards. Ivanov's massive body sunk to the floor with a thunk.

Lin addressed him as he coughed violently. ".....It seems you didn't toughen up your head."



*What just happened right now?*

He saw a gun shell come out of the knife suddenly. And that was not an illusion. He heard Lin's specialized weapon were knives. *But it wasn't a normal knife then?*

He heard Lin's voice in the midst of his hazy consciousness. "Ahh, this? You don't know of it? It's the Type 82-2 Chinese gun knife."

*A gun knife? Does that mean it's a gun in the shape of a knife?*

As the world spun, Lin smiled triumphantly. "If you're a professional killer, then you should know at least the characteristics of the weapons throughout the world."

Munakata was reading a newspaper in the car. It was a local paper of west Japan, and in it he found an article of a certain case he recognized.

[This morning the body of a woman has been found in a hotel in Fukuoka City. The police are investigating the whereabouts of the man staying in the room. Research into if the act of this man are done by the same person as the two other cases in the past are proceeding.] That was the content.

If they caught the man then the past cases would all be resolved. Then there would be no concern for the mass media to look into the mayor's son. He felt relieved having one problem cleaned up.

Munakata looked at his wrist watch. It was almost time to meet up with Reiko and Shinohara. Ivanov headed to kill a killer of the Kakyuu Group, but it had been more than thirty minutes already. He should be done with that one job by now. He decided to try and contact him.

He tried to give him a call, but Ivanov did not readily pick it up. The dialing tone continues. Just as he thought to give it up already, it finally went through.

Munakata gave a faint smile. "How'd it go? Is he dead?"

### **Bottom of Seventh Inning**

*That was close.*

While settling his unstable breathing, Lin wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. *That bastard crushing me with that stupid strength.* He glared at the

dead body of the large man. Still feeling the sensation of fingers pressing into his throat, Lin rubbed around his neck several times.

It was then. He heard the ring of a cellphone go off. It was from the large man's pocket. He went ahead and took it before looking at the screen. The caller was M. *For it to just be an initial means they were thorough with their information management*, he admired.

Lin picked up the call.

[How'd it go? Is he dead?] What he heard was the voice of a man.

*By him he probably means me*, Lin observed instantly. He decided to converse with him. He could get some information out of him.

"Yeah," I'm not dead, you bastard. "I killed him."

[It took you quite a bit, huh?]

"He was stronger than I expected."

At that the man fell silent. After a while he spoke. [Say, Suzuki.]

"What is it?"

[Who are you?]

"Who," his heart speed up. "What do you mean who?"

[The owner of this phone's name is not Suzuki.]

*So that's it.*

He probably noticed from the beginning. He was played with.

[Are you the killer employed by Zhang?]

"Yeah, that's right." He confirmed honestly. There was no point in pretending further. "That bastard Zhang requested you guys to kill me, right?"

The man did not affirm it nor did he deny it. [What happened to the owner of this phone?]

"Who knows."

The man's voice turned harsh. [Answer me.]

*Could the man on the phone be this large man's employer?* From the way he cared for the large man's state of being, he considered he could be someone close to him. Then perhaps they were friends.

[Where are you right now?]

"As if I would tell you something like that." *Who in the world would say that?*

[You know what, no, I don't need it. I finished tracing the call. It seems you're still in the Kakyuu group's office.]

"Damn," Lin clicked his tongue. "So you just saved up on time by talking?"

[So then, you really are in the office.]

"Wha"

He tutted again. *He got me. He lead me on.*

[Your voice is rather hoarse. Your breathing is hard. You're wounded then? Then you can't run very far.] He is a sharp man. His voice is also calm. [I'll go see you now. Watch your back. I'm coming for you.]

"Shit"

The call was dropped. He had to get out of here quickly. So he thought, but the knife in his side was cut in deeply. When he tried to walk a sharp pain ran through his body, and he staggered. *This isn't good. If I have to get away from here quickly. That man is coming. I have to run away.* However, he cannot walk well.

It was then. Suddenly the doors of the office opened.

Lin instantly took his stance. *So a pursuer already came?* He paled, but he was mistaken.

The one who appeared was someone unexpected.

".....Ba-banba?"

It was that detective, Zenji Banba.

Banba looked around the area and smiled bitterly. "Whoaa, you really went all out here."

“You, why are you here-”

Banba did not answer. “Could you give me that there phone?”

“Eh?”

“The cell phone. They could be that GPS or somethin’.”

He seized the large man’s cell phone from Lin’s hand and turned it off. He then put it in his own pockets.

“How did you know I was here? Did you follow me?”

“It was the redback spider.”

“Ha?”

“It’s the bug with a dispatch feature,” Banba touched Lin’s collar. He picked up a small listening device in the shape of a spider. He did not notice he set that there.

“Exactly when did you?”

“When you was blissfully snorin’ away.”

Banba then attached the listening device onto the large man’s collar.

Lin left Zhang’s office with Banba.

In the elevator, Banba addressed him. “You alright there?”

“Nothing too bad.”

Honestly, it was difficult to even stand. When he was walking while staggering Banba turned around and asked. “You’re slow. If you can’t a-walkin’, should I carry you?”

“Shut up. I don’t need it.”

A car was parked in front of the building. It was a Mini with the Japanese white line on its red body. It appeared to be Banba’s car. Banba said as he opened the back seat door, “Now get in. We’re gettin’ away.”

Lin hesitated. *What is this man thinking? Why is he helping him? Is there something hidden behind this act of courtesy?* He read too deep into it. It disgusted him how overly kind he was being.

“Why are you helping me?”

When he asked with an apparent expression of wariness, Banba gave a broad smile. “People of Hakata ain’t meddlers.”

*Just what is he thinking?* He is a man he cannot read at all.

In any case staying here like this will only end in being caught by the man M on the phone. He decided to get in the car in honesty. Lying down on his side in the seat, his rough breathing returns.

As he is rocked by the car, he thought about it over and over. *What am I doing? My sister was killed, and I was tricked by the organization. In the end, Zhang was able to run away. In the end of it all I could not grasp the key in finding the culprit who killed my sister. It’s pathetic.* Spontaneously tears well up.

While waiting for the light, he met his gaze with Banba in the rear view mirror. Banba narrowed his eyes. “Dontcha cry now.”

“I’m not crying,” he replied back with all he had.

Saitou recalled his memories fragmentary, but unsure of what he should do he wandered within the city. As he was taking refuge in an electronics store, he heard a voice saying, “the suspect is the officer worker Takuya Itou,” from behind him. Being called by his fake name suddenly, Saitou turned around at once. His face was being displayed on several large TV screens lined up together. Feeling he was being pointed out by many people, Saitou sped out of the store in a hurry. Apparently the woman’s body was discovered at the hotel and he is being investigated as the suspect.

After buying a mask and glasses at the 100 yen store and hiding his face, he then escaped into a fast food joint. His heart was beating incessantly hard in his chest.

*What should I do?* Saitou was at a loss. *It would only be a matter of time before I get caught. If I pleaded innocence to the police, would they believe me? If I get caught, that is the end for me. My life.*

*Someone, help me.* He fished through his contacts on his cell phone, clinging onto that thought. *Who should I try to contact? My parents? No, I can’t. I can’t*

*have them worried. Friends? No, I can't. There is no one I have I can consult to with something like this.*

Suddenly one contact caught his eye. It was the phone number for Bar.Babylon. *That's right, You have to set a thief to catch a thief. If it's them they may be able to do something.* He took out several business cards from his back pockets. They were the ones from the facilities he visited the night before. After them was the one he received from the avenger Jiro. On the business card the shop's address for Babylon is written. It is in the first block of Nakasu. It is close from here.

*Let's drop by.* Though going there did not mean it would become anything. After all he is a wanted person. However, if it was them they are probably used to this sort of abnormal situation. They may be able to find a good resolution to this.

The bar Jiro runs was at the end of the second floor of the Marugen building. The closed sign was hung, but the door was not locked. After he knocked, Saitou opened the door.

The inside was not very spacious and had a snug atmosphere. There were five seats at the counter and two booths. It was a shop he would enjoy peacefully as a regular customer. On the counter a black cat was cleaning up its face. Jiro was next to it and was working on a calculator, probably doing sales calculations.

"I'm sorry. I'm still in the middle of something." Noticing a visitor, Jiro looked up. He was a bit surprised to see it was Saitou. "Oh my, isn't it dear Saitou-chan?"

"Jiro-san, help me!" Saitou had a tearful voice.

"Oh dear, what's wrong? Are you alright?"

"The truth is – "

Saitou explained his situation. Jiro poured two glasses of oolong tea and pointed to one of them for Saitou. "That is quite the mess."

"I couldn't remember anything after that, and when I woke up I was in my hotel room."

"And so the woman was dead next to you, right?"

“That’s exactly it.”

Jiro frowned. “You were set up. You poor thing.”

“I was set up?”

“Someone committed rape and murder. And they set you up as the criminal in their stead. The person who committed the murder was another man, and that woman you met was probably covering for that man.”

*What should I do? Saitou grasped his head on the counter. Actually, how did it end up like this in the first place? I had to come to Fukuoka. Actually, no, it was wrong to sought employment from that kind of company. Wait no, even before that it was wrong for me to pass the company examine. The interview from that time. I should have answered “I don’t know,” to that question “How would you kill someone?” I should have answered, “I can’t kill someone.” It’s my fault I tried to give a different answer than the others. I shouldn’t have said, “I don’t have the courage or the skill for it, so in the case there is someone I want to kill no matter what I think I’d just pay others and have them kill them.”*

*.....No, wait a second.*

Saitou had been holding his head when he suddenly looked up.

*I don’t have the courage or the skill for it, so I think I’d just pay others and have them kill them.*

*Since I don’t have the courage or the skill for it, I pay others-*

*That’s it,* he thought. It occurred to him. So there was that method. Saitou slammed his fists on the counter.

“.....Jiro-san. I beg of you.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Please avenge this.”

If he could not do something, he could ask others to do it. And pay money.

Jiro’s eyes widened. “What do you mean, Saitou-chan?”

“Jiro-san, you’re an avenger, right? Then, please avenge this. Please put the blame on the culprit who put the crime on me. It’s alright. If you need money, I

have it. Since I just got my payment from the company.”

Showing his balance statement,

“I see. So that is the case. Alright then. I will take your request.” Jiro consented readily. In this industry money was everything.

“Since you don’t have any other place to stay for the time being, you can stay here for awhile.”

“Really!?”

“Yes. The police won’t come by our store.”

“The police don’t come?”

“There’s a detective I’m on good terms with. So don’t worry.”

“Ahh, thank you very much, Jiro-san.” The shady okama vowed to him. Jiro then tilted his head in wonder. “By the way, why is it now that such a normal person as yourself is working for Murder Inc again?”

When he explained how he talked about the pitch he made at the job interview, how he transferred to Fukuoka, and all the details since then Jiro gave a bitter smile, “that is quite the disaster.” *Just as he says, it is really a disaster.*

“Even so, for you to have been an ace pitcher for that famous, veteran school.” Jiro was awfully surprised. *Is it really something to be shocked over?* Though with how he was right now it must certainly be hard to imagine.

“Well then why are you doing this sort of work?” This time Saitou asked about it.

“At first I did a proper job. I was a beauty artist.”

He could believe he was a beauty artist. He was certainly well refined and had that sort of air to him.

“Six years ago from now, my lover was killed.” Jiro’s expression clouded over. *So when he means lover, then is that person really a man then?* He was a bit interested, but he did not inquire about that.

“That culprit was a killer. My lover was hacked to pieces with a knife. I



thought, I want him dead. So I also hired a killer and had him kill that killer. Don't they often say there is no meaning into revenge or that it would only sadden our lovers in heaven? I think that's a lie. When that man died I felt happy. It was not for the sake of my lover; I had them avenged for my sake. I was satisfied."

It was not like he could not know his feelings. If he was in the same situation, he would probably hate the person enough to want to kill his lover's foe.

"There are crimes in this world that have to be punished for, right? I thought there were surely people out there wondering the same thing."

*And so I started this job,* Jiro smiled.

"And how about that girl?" The elementary school girl that was with Jiro. *Why is that girl helping with an avenger's work?*

"Ahh, you mean Misaki? Around the time I started being an avenger, I was told someone wanted a certain man beat down and killed. And I went to that man's house and avenged him. And then from in the closet that girl was staring my way. She was probably abused by the man. She had bruises all over her body, and she was thin and in shabby condition. I was troubled on what to do. I was seen doing a crime, so I thought it'd be better to kill her, but then that girl said to me."

"Said what?"

"Thank you for taking down dad." Jiro shrugged his shoulders. "After cleaning up I brought her back, put her in the bath and made her eat."

"So that happened to her....."

Jiro smiled desolately. It was the expression of blaming himself. "That child is smart, so she understands everything. Once she saw this world, she could no longer return to the normal world again."

Once she saw this world, she could no longer return to the normal world again. Jiro's words sunk into his heart like lead. *Is he also like that? Would he no longer be able to return to a normal life once again?* The more he thought about it, his future only turned more dark and gloomy.

“That girl is desperate to not be a disturbance to my work. If she became a hindrance, she thinks she’ll be thrown away and killed. And so, she tries to help me. And so it’s the worst to have such a small child like that help with this sort of work.”

He could not nod at Jiro’s words.

# Eighth Inning

## Top of Eighth Inning

An unknown man answered Ivanov's cell phone. For a man he had a slightly higher pitched, young voice. Zhang had said there was a kid he wanted punished. The man on the phone was likely the killer Lin that was employed by the Kakyuu group.

Munakata hurried to the Kakyuu group's office with the car. He made the call to Reiko to head there as well. While waiting at the light, thoughts ran through his head. *What's the meaning of this? Why did Lin answer the phone? It can't be; is Ivanov dead? He was killed by that man? It can't be. Would Ivanov be killed by such a kid?* Perhaps he just dropped his cell phone. However, he did not think Ivanov would slip up like that.

Unpleasant thoughts clouded over his mind, and he shook his head in an attempt to swipe them away.

".....No, it's still unknown." Munakata whispered. His voice had that tone as though to convince himself. He should not assume he was dead already.

*Even so, isn't this light too long?* It had been red for some time now. More than five minutes had passed. *No, it is because I'm in a hurry is all, right?* It turned green, and he moved the car forward. *It's irritating.* It made him think there was someone making the lights red on our purpose.

Being held back due to the lights, it took thirty minutes to arrive at the office. Even though normally it was a distance that should have been only ten minutes to get to. Naturally it was already after Lin had escaped.

It was a sea of blood in the room. There were five bodies fallen on the ground inside. Two were stabbed, and three of them were shot down. Zhang and two of his lackeys were in the room .

"I'm disappointed." When he saw Munakata, Zhang addressed him in displeasure. "It seems the killer you provided wasn't that much."

Zhang gazed towards the door leading to the next room. He had a bad

premonition. He opened the doors quickly. In the center of the room Ivanov was fallen. He was dead. *What the hell?* He felt lightheaded.

Zhang and his lackeys were watching the television screen next to Munakata. He heard the words “fast forward it” and “rewind it.” They appeared to be watching a recorded video. It was probably footage from the security cameras. The entrance of the office was being displayed on the screen. Munakata and them confirmed the footage.

In the footage it first showed a young looking woman figure. When he asked who this was, Zhang told him it was Lin. *Wasn't he a man?* The next who came in was Ivanov. A little while after that a tall man came in. And then the man and Lin covered in blood came out together.

*Are these two friends?*

Zhang's expression was precipitous. He ordered his underlings with a sharp voice. “Kill these guys no matter the cost. Hire the best killer in Hakata. I don't care how much he'll be.”

One of the lackeys nodded at Zhang's order and left the room immediately.

“Please wait, Zhang-san.” Munakata spoke up. “Won't you leave that job to us?”

His colleague and precious friend was killed. Even he could not simply withdraw from this.

“Could you do it?” It was the mimicry of looking down on him.

“Of course.” It was a foolish question. Killing was a killer's job.

“Well, it's fine then. In exchange I have a condition. You cannot kill them. Capture them alive and bring them to us. And since we will do it ourselves, if we find them quicker than you and we kill them, you can't complain about it.”

“.....Understood.”

As he answered with that Reiko arrived at the office. In front of Ivanov's corpse Reiko also was trying to hide her shock.

Munakata carried Ivanov's body to the car. It was a task that could break his bones carrying a body more than one hundred kilograms, but he did not care.

Since the body was too big to fit in the trunk when he tried to stuff it in there, he folded it in the back seat. Munakata got in the driver's seat, and Reiko got in the passenger's seat.

Munakata hung his head, nearly leaning on the wheel. ".....If it was going to end up like this, I shouldn't have sent Ivanov on his own."

He scratched at his head. Ivanov dying was a miscalculation on his part. He underestimated the other killer.

"It's not your fault." Reiko's tone was calm. "The opponent was a killer. It's different from the general people or yakuza we deal with usually. Don't you think it is just like a hunter who can't catch anything but rabbits to suddenly hunt a bear? If it was an opponent even Ivanov couldn't handle, it would be the same result even if we were there."

"Can you believe he could lose? I'm sure a dirty trick was used. Like he was taken by surprise and shot. If I came along, he wouldn't have died."

"That's wrong." Reiko looked over her shoulder. "Look, on Ivanov's arm there are defensive wounds. His opponent met with him and won in close combat."

There was reason in what Reiko said as well. However, Munakata could not help blaming himself.

"So that killer Lin is rather strong then. For killing a killer like Ivanov. Perhaps he was the rumored Niwaka Samurai."

"No, he's not." Munakata shook his head feebly. Ivanov was shot in the forehead with a gun. "That method isn't the Niwaka Samurai's."

"Really?"

"I would know." It was because he met the Niwaka Samurai before. "The Niwaka Samurai doesn't use guns."

It was that moment. A call came in. On the screen the characters "son" was displayed. It was from Yusuke. He sighed with irritation. "It's from the perverted son."

[Heey, Munakata-saan,] He heard the usual idiotic voice when he answered the call. [Still nothing on the next giirl? I can't wait any longer.]

“I’m busy right now. Do it later!” He thoughtlessly yelled.

“Hand it over to me for a minute,” Reiko unable to let this pass took the phone from the side. “We’ll contact the broker right now and buy one. Please just wait patiently.”

After Reiko finished the call, Munakata spoke harshly. “That little shit. Just how high is that kid’s drive? It’s abnormal. We can kill him right now. That way we drop some pointless jobs, and it’d be of some good for the world too.”

“Calm down. You should rest for a bit. Did you take any naps?”

“I can’t do that.” Even though he was busy enough between being bodyguard for the mayor and cleaning up after his son, at this time his priority was his friend’s vengeance. He had no time to rest. However, he did not care about that. “I won’t get any rest until I find that Lin and his friend.”

Reiko was making a call somewhere with Munakata’s cell phone. “.....It’s not ringing.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Ivanov’s cell phone isn’t ringing.”

It should not have been dropped in the office. “So they left with it?”

“Probably.” Reiko was making another call again. “Ah, hello? Shinohara? Is right now alright? I want you to look up the GPS in Ivanov’s cell phone, ASAP.”

### **Bottom of Eighth Inning**

He appeared to have lost consciousness after that. When he woke up, a familiar scenery entered his vision. It was the Detective Banba’s Office. It was messy as always. Lin was in the bed. He had a changing of clothes. He was wearing black sweatpants, but the size on him is baggy. It was probably Banba’s. Bandages were wrapped around the wound on his stomach. *Was I given treatment at some point?*

“It’s alright. I had a doctor come look at you.” Banba voiced. He was right next to him, gazing at him.

Lin slowly raised his upper body. His wounds flared up in pain. When he tried to crawl out of the bed he was stopped by Banba. “Dontcha move now.”

“.....I gotta go.”

“Where you reckon’ you goin’ in that shape?”

That was obvious. It was for revenge. Since a listening device was planted on him Banba should already know the details. “I’m going to go kill him. The culprit who killed my sister.”

“How?”

“What do you mean ‘how?’ I’ll kill him like I always have with everyone else.” The usual killing method did not change. He would stab them with a knife. That was the end of it.

“Who’re you gonna kill? Do you know who killed your sister? Do you know where he is?”

Lin was taken aback when he said that. He just killed according to what Zhang told him until now. Having his target’s name, face, and address looked up already, he then just had to kill the target. However, it was different now.

“You’re makin’ a face of someone who thinks he can do ever’thing by himself, but people can’t live alone.”

Banba’s words pierced into his heart terribly.

“.....Even so, I have to live alone.”

He did not have family anymore. His mother died. His sister was also killed.

Banba gave him a smile. “You gotta learn to depend on others more.”

“Depend on? That’s ridiculous.” Lin rejected. It would be a matter of who would help him when he asked for it. “Or else what? Are you going to help me?”

“Haven’t I said I’d be of help when you’re in a pinch?”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I ain’t sayin’ I can’t.”

“Ha!” Lin laughed at him. “Then find the culprit for me. That perverted bastard who killed my sister.”

Banba closed one of his eyes. “Leave it to ol’ me. Background checks are a detective’s specialty.”

It was then. They heard the sound of knocking on the door.

“It’s as messy as always.”

A man appeared while giving a shocked voice. His age was around forty. His hair short. The width of his shoulders were wide, and he had the figure of someone who did rugby or American football. He was called “Shigematsu-san” by Banba. The man Shigematsu spotted Lin in the bed and was startled. “Hey, hey, Banba. What is the meaning of this? I didn’t know you were sheltering a woman.”

“He ain’t a woman. He’s a man.”

“I’m not sure how much that would change it.”

“Shigematsu-san, look at that kid’s neck.”

“His neck?” Shigematsu got close to Lin. He intently examined his neck, and his eyes opened wide. “This – it can’t be.”

“What is it? Scrutinizing me like that. What’s up with my neck?” Lin frowned deeply.

*Just what are they talking about?* He was the only one out of the loop.

“How’d you get this bruise?” He was asked by Shigematsu.

“Bruise? Ahh.” It was probably something he got when he was being strangled by that large man. He was unsure how he should answer this.

When he sent a glance towards Banba, he nodded with a smile. Since it was the expression of “it’s okay to talk about it,” he decided to tell him honestly. “I was attacked by a killer. Though I managed to get back at him.”

“What type of killer?”

“He was a large man. About two meters tall. It seemed he had friends.” After he answered, he looked at Banba. “Hey, who is this old man?”

“A police detective.”

“A police-” Lin unconsciously raised his voice. His blood pressure instantly



dropped. “It can’t be. You sold me out?”

Just as he thought he was betrayed he was proven wrong. Shigematsu smiled wryly. “Don’t worry. I don’t plan on arresting you.”

“It’s a-okay. Shigematsu-san is a nice detective to killers. I got him to look into the man who killed your sister.”

“Here, look.” Shigematsu handed over a stack of papers. “This is the investigation data you asked for.”

“Thank you.” Banba took it.

“The culprit’s name is Takuya Itou. Last night he was playing around in Nakasu and was apparently pretty drunk. There is also eyewitness reports. From *oppabus*, sex cabarets, and hustles Itou hopped from he – “

“Wait a second.” Lin started. “What’s an *oppabu*?”

“A place where you can touch girl’s boobs.” The one who answered was Banba.

“Then, a sex cabaret?”

“A place where you can touch girl’s boobs.”

“A hustle?”

“A place where you can touch girl’s boobs. You got it?”

“..... I get that this guy likes boobs.”

“Any man is like that.” Shigematsu said.

“I like butts more.” Banba rebutted.

“Like I know.” He could care less about that.

After clearing his throat, Shigematsu returned to the main topic. “However, there is something a bit strange.”

“Strange? What is?”

“There were two similar cases in the past, but both of the women’s bodies were thrown away in the outskirts. For some reason only this time it was left in a hotel room. What’s more, this officer worker Itou apparently just arrived to

Fukuoka from transferring work places. When I looked into it he took a shinkansen just last week. So when the two previous cases occurred he was still in Tokyo.”

“That is really strange.”

“Right? Well, this is as far as I’ve looked into it.”

“Thank you, Shigematsu-san.”

“If something happens, contact me.” He finished with that and left.

He looked over the data he received from Shigematsu. Aside from what he talked about just previously, there were no other important information written. “So that just led to an end where we still don’t know anything.” Lin shrugged his shoulders.

“Nah, there’s a lot we got to know.”

“You think?” Lin was half in doubt.

“What we can deduce from what Shigematsu told us is that there are two patterns to think of. One is that the culprit who killed your sister is different from the culprit of the previous two cases. The other is that all three cases was done by the same person, and the suspect Itou was just pulled into it.”

“Even if we know that, how are you going to find the killer?”

“*Mentaiko* will do.” Banba suggested out of the blue.

“Whaa? *Mentaiko*?”

“The pay. I’ll take your request for five years worth of *mentaiko*.” Banba started to make a call to somewhere.

After Shigematsu departed, thirty minutes later there was knocking on the door again. This time it was a young man who appeared. Well, it was uncertain whether he was young or not because half of his face was hidden by his long bangs. However, his outfit was flashy and he seemed young. He was called “Enokida-kun” by Banba.

The man Enokida looked at Lin, and the corners of his mouth curved into a complacent smile. “You’re Xianming Lin? Seems you’re in quite the mess.”

Lin looked over at Banba. “Hey, Banba. Who is this mushroom guy?”

“He’s Enokida-kun. He’s an informant-san.”

“An informant?”

Enokida took out a laptop from the backpack he was carrying. “Hey, Lin-kun. Those guys in the Kakyuu group are pretty mad, you know? They say they plan to hire the most skilled killer in Hakata to kill you.”

“That’s perfect. I’ll just get back at them then.” He tried to act tough, but the wound on his stomach throbbed. *Would I be able to fight a killer in this state though?* He could not brush away his uneasiness.

“Just as Banba told me, I looked up the data in the cell phone.” Enokida handed over the cell phone to Banba. It was the large man’s. “I restored all of the deleted messages too, but there wasn’t anything left that would be evidence worthy. It seems all the important calls were all exchanged on the phone.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Well, don’t get so down now. It’s not like someone like me came all the way here with no information to give.” Enokida huffed proudly. “I looked into the security cameras at the hotel Takuya Itou was staying at, but something interesting was shown.”

Enokida said and opened up his laptop. The footage played on the screen. It was at an angle displaying an elevator on a floor somewhere in the hotel. Enokida explained as he pointed it out. “Look here. At first Itou and a woman come in. At this time it seems Itou-kun is already quite drunk.”

With certainty the man on the screen was walking while being half pulled by the woman.

“This woman resembles the woman in the photo. She was with the mayor and Zhang.”

“I compared them, but they are with little doubt the same person.”

And then Enokida fast forward it a bit and then stopped it again. “Thirty minutes after this a man wearing an eye-patch comes in. While pulling in a

super large case.”

“He really is. It’s the large size a person might could fit into.”

*It can’t be*, he thought. “Does that mean Qiaomei was stuffed in this and carried there?”

“Probably so.”

“So for her to be killed elsewhere and brought here means Itou was just dragged into the incident. How unlucky that fella is.”

“So, ten minutes after that the eye-patch guy and the woman from before leave with the case in tow. After this it shows Itou running away come morning.”

“Why would they go through all this trouble?”

“It’s simple.” Enokida answered. “They want to camouflage the true culprit.”

“For a killer hired by the mayor to be involved.....it can’t be; then mayor Harada killed the woman?”

“There’s no way he has the time for that. It’s a busy period of time for him.” Enokida opened a sound file on his laptop this time. “Listen to this. This was a recording of a conversation from the listening device you put on that large man’s body.”

They listened closely. They heard a man’s voice from the laptop. [It’s from the perverted son. – I’m busy right now. Do it later!] After that was a woman’s voice. [Hand it over to me for a minute – We’ll contact the broker right now and buy one. Please just wait patiently.] Lastly there was the voice of the man again. [Just how high is that kid’s drive? It’s abnormal.] He recognized the man’s voice. It was the man from that phone call.

“He says something about a perverted son.”

“That’s right. The mayor has one son. His name is Yusuke Harada. He’s a university student. Seems he’s quite the naughty guy. He’s rather famous in some areas. Even though he gets involved in various crimes, it seems they’re all erased due to his father’s money and influence.”

Broker, buy, perverted son, drive, abnormal. Imagining the scenario from

those words, *are they buying women off of human trafficking to try and satisfy his abnormal sexual drive?*

“So that shit bag Yusuke Harada bought my sister and killed her?”

“Most likely. And the one who assisted in the deal was the Kakyuu group.”

It was Zhang’s work. *I’ll kill him*, he bit into his lips. Lin jumped off of the bed.

Banba grabbed Lin’s shoulder. “Wait up a sec now. Where you reckon’ you’re headin’ to?”

“I’m going to kill him. That son.” He moved his gaze from Banba to Enokida. “Hey, mushroom. If you’re an informant then you know at least where that damn kid is, right?”

“I haven’t looked into it, but his card would be strict. If you jump in upfront, you’ll be killed by the killers the mayor has hired. I think you should give up on that.”

“I’m not that stupid. I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Taking into account of Yusuke Harada’s sexual habits, then there should be another human trafficking exchange to take place between the mayor’s side and the Kakyuu group. I’ll aim for that. We’ll impersonate someone from the Kakyuu group and make the exchange.”

“But to do that, you need a woman for the trade.”

“If it’s a woman we need, we have one right here.”

“.....You don’t mean.”

“That’s right. I’ll crossdress, be sold, and enter the enemy’s territory. Then I’ll aim for the moment I’m alone with that damn kid and kill him.” But that was an impossible plan to do alone. Lin bowed his head towards Banba and Enokida. “I want you to lend me a hand. Please.”

Banba’s expression was sullen. “But a plan like that has too many risks. You ain’t gettin’ away scott-free.”

He did not really care. “I’ll be fine with it if I kill him.”

Banba gave a small sigh. He patted a hand on Lin's head and smiled. "Dontcha spout some depressin' stuff now; we gotta plan on how you're gonna skedaddle outta there."

".....Okay. But if it gets dangerous for don't hesitate to leave me behind. Alright?"

Banba did not nod. "Enokida-kun, you can use bugs or do some of that there hackin', so can you find the date and time of the next dealin' and the meetup place?"

"Okay." Enokida was excited.

After escorting Lin home, Banba parked his car in a Nakasu parking lot and visited his favorite food cart. It was a store named 'Gen-chan,' and the boss's name was Genzo, but Banba called him "big daddy." He was already over his mid fifties. The lonely hairs on his head told a story.

"Ohh, Banba, huh. Welcome." Genzo greeted him with a smile. His eyes narrowed and wrinkles formed on his face when he smiled. "Is the usual fine?"

"The usual? You got nothin' but ramen."

"We got beer too."

"Beer is fine. I'll take a car back. Ramen and a cold beer."

While Genzo was the owner of the food cart, he was also famous killer agent in this industry. He mediated jobs to freelance killers.

"You know," Genzo started speaking, lowering his voice. "An unbelievable request came in from the Kakyuu group today."

"The Kakyuu group?" It was the organization Lin worked for. He answered while chewing on the ramen. "When you mean Kakyuu group, you mean that Chinese mafia? They make easy money from human traffickin'."

Genzo nodded, amazed. "You know quite a bit, as expected. Just as you say, the Kakyuu group gathers youngins for human traffickin' and have a portion of them special education for killin'. And that even among them they hire especially talented kids as their own organization's killers."

"Huh."

“But they say a killer rebelled.”

“Rebelled?”

“They gone against the organization and killed plenty of their employees. Seems they had a dispute over money.”

That was without a doubt Lin. He already knew this. “That seems to be quite the pickle there.”

“Also, the talk has come ‘round here. Said to introduce a freelance killer to them. Said they wanted a veteran with real experience from another team than a native born rookie and have ‘em be the ready fire power.”

“I see.”

“The one who’s more surprised is me.” Genzo moved his face in closely.

“What is?”

“That ridiculous request was to kill two men. The first was the former killer of the Kakyuu Group, Xianming Lin.”

Genzo left one photo next to his ramen.

“The second is you. Zenji Banba.”

The photo showed Lin and Banba escaping from the Kakyuu group’s office. It was probably an image taken from the security cameras.

Genzo had an exasperated face. “Seriously. You done got involved in trouble again. Enough already.”

“Hehe.” He laughed and did not even try to fool him.

“The Kakyuu group said to hand over the most skilled killer. A killer suited for killing killers among those contracted with us is – the Niwaka Samurai.”

The Niwaka Samurai was one of the killers Genzo mediated work for. Only a small portion of people knew the Niwaka Samurai’s existence, but everyone who did put down everything they had to try and request a killing of a killer.

“Well, I reckon’ that’s the case.”

“Although I didn’t want you dead, I ain’t got many taken requests. Hey,

Banba. What should I oughta do? Should I introduce the Niwaka Samurai to the Kakyuu group?"

Banba gave an immediate reply. "Yeah. That's fine. Go introduce him."

"Are you sane now?" Genzo was surprised. It could not be helped. "It's a request to kill you. How you gonna go about it?"

"I reckon' if I should play dead."

Genzo shrugged his shoulders. "Watch yourself. Dontcha dare up and die."

"You bet." Banba raised his hands and responded. "Thank you for the meal." Once Banba finished his meal, he went to the small clinic, Saeki cosmetic clinic, in a place facing Watanabe street. Naturally at this period of time it was closed, but it was not like he came for an examination. The director of this place, Saeki, was an acquaintance of his and helped with various underground jobs.

"Saeki-sensei, thank you for today. You was a great help."

Saeki was the one who attended to Lin's wounds. When he said his thanks, he gave a bitter smile. "You're about the only person who would bring a patient stabbed with a knife to a cosmetic clinic."

"I got no one else to look at him."

"So then, what's wrong this time?"

"I have a bit of a favor to ask of you."

In the examination room there were no patients or nurses. It was always Saeki alone at this time. However, there was a preceding visitor. He heard a cheerful voice from the examination room. "Oh my, isn't it Banba-chan?"

It was an acquaintance of his. "It's Jiro. What are you doin' around here?"

"No way. There's only one reason a woman would come to a place like this (a cosmetic surgery clinic). It's because she wants to become beautiful."

"He came to dispose of a body." Saeki answered in his place. Saeki was in his mid-thirties, had his hair parted and wore glasses. He had the habit to talk politely regardless if the person was older or younger than he was. His eyes and personality seemed earnestly mild and gentle-mannered, so no one would even



consider he did an atrocious job as a cleaner.

“What kind of body?”

He peeked into the examination room. A body was lain out on the examination table. It was a corpse with his head and body severed.

“A boy. He’s young. A high-school student.”

He thought of a good idea. Banba suggested to Jiro. “Hey, won’t you sell this body to me?”

“That’s fine, but his eyes are crushed. His head is also cut off.”

“That’s perfect.”

“What will you use it for?”

“To play dead with.” Banba suddenly remembered. “Actually, Jiro. I have a fella I want revenge on, but can I ask this of you?”

“If it’s a favor from you, I’ll listen to any request. Who is it?”

“The mayor’s son.”

“My, the mayor’s? Just what happened?”

“Well, an acquaintance of mine had his sister raped and killed. Look here, it’s on the news right now, right? That case with the body of the Chinese exchange student found at a hotel. It seems the culprit is the mayor’s son.”

“Wait a moment, Banba-chan.” The smile on Jiro’s face vanished. He had a serious expression and bends himself forward. “Will you allow me to hear the details?”

“Why?”

“In truth, there’s a person I know who got involved in that incident. He said when he woke up he was in the hotel and that a woman was dead on the bed.”

“Oh my goodness.” This was a coincidence. “The world is rather small, huh.”

Jiro nodded keenly. “No kidding.”

# Ninth Inning

## Top of Ninth Inning

A few hours after that a call came in from Shinohara to Reiko's smartphone.

[It seem the power was cut off so Ivanov-san's cell phone log was lost midway, but there was a response in just one location. It's the internet cafe in the Gates building.]

That meant there was a signal at that place just once.

[I was able to look into the internet cafe's security cameras of that time from the police. I'll send the footage over right away.]

And the call dropped. A little while later a message arrived. There were several video files attached. They parked at a nearby parking garage, and Munakata and Reiko thoroughly checked through each one.

Munakata had a response at the third video. He pointed to the tall man walking down the hallway in the footage. "It's this man."

"What is?"

"It's the man who got away with Lin. He appeared in the surveillance cameras in the Kakyuu group's office."

The man stopped in front of one of the booths and knocked on the door. There was another man inside. He was a man with a gaudy appearance and silver dyed mushroom-like hair. He was handing over something. It looked like a cell phone. "So this guy had Ivanov's cellphone then?"

The men were having a conversation in the booth. They could not tell what they were talking about. He ended up thinking, if only Ivanov was here at a time like this. Even though he could read lips.

"For the mean time, we're going to catch this man."

The tall man left the internet cafe, but the mushroom head man may still be in the booth. Munakata turned the handle. He made a U-turn and headed for Nakasu.

The man was not in the internet cafe facility. When they asked an employee he apparently said he had business in meeting someone and was going to go out for a bit. Munakata and Reiko decided to keep watch at the facility's entrance.

After awhile, a man got off the elevator. From his appearance he looked like the person shown in the surveillance footage. It was without a doubt that man.

Reiko blocked the man's path from upfront and Munkata sneaked up on him from behind. He pressed the tip of the gun in the center of the man's back and threatened with, "Don't move." They then dragged him into a nearby multipurpose bathroom. The man obediently followed them without any resistance.

"What's your name?"

"Enokida." The man answered. Because his long bangs covered his face he could not read his expression, but his tone was calm and composed. "Do you have some sort of business with me?"

"Enokida-kun, you have someone else's cell phone, right?"

"Ahh, I see." He raised his voice as though he remembered something. "So you're Ivanov's friends then? The killers hired by the mayor."

Munakata could not hide his surprise. *Why does this man know that?* When he questioned it suspiciously, Enokida smiled, "I'm an informant after all."

Reiko thrust the gun at Enokida's head. "I'll give you a warning. You shouldn't do anything remotely noticeable. Informants do a dangerous sort of work after all."

And then Enokida suddenly stated something absurd. "Say, why do you think the back of redback spiders are red anyway?"

"Ha?" Spiders? What did he say? Munakata frowns deeply.

"Don't you think mixing in with the normal spiders would allow them to not be noticed by humans? Even poisonous mushrooms are like that. Even though they could kill more humans if they don't have such a flashy color and stick with a soil color like shiitake mushrooms instead. Wonder why that is?"

*Like I'd know*, Munakata thought. It seemed he had a little more to add.

"I thought a reason for that." Enokida smiled, showing his teeth. "That it's definitely just because it's cooler."

*Doesn't that rock?* He made meaningless comments. He did not follow.

"Enough with the pointless talk. If you don't want to die, answer us honestly." He did not have the time to participate in Enokida's nonsense. Munakata showed him a single photo. "You know this man, right? He was shown in the surveillance cameras with you."

He thought he would be more reluctant, but Enokida surprisingly gave an immediate reply. "Yeah, I know him."

"Who is this man?"

"Hmm," Enokida turned towards Munakata and held out his open palm. It meant if he wanted information he would have to pay up. It looked like this man was not exactly their ally then. He was just a mere informant. Right now he was still on fair ground. Informants made a heartless business. They would turn to any place with an abundance of money. *It seems I can use this man*, he thought.

After he took out several ten thousand yen bills from his wallet and handed it over to Enokida, he immediately began to speak. "The man's name is Zenji Banba. He's an independent detective."

"Tell me his whereabouts."

"You don't need to. He'll come on his own."

"What does that mean?"

"You know Xianming Lin, right? His sister was killed by the mayor's son. His objective is revenge against his son. And Zenji Banba is assisting him in that."

"So he would come to us on his own then? When? How?"

"Hm," Enokida held out his hand again. When he gave him more money reluctantly, he once again confessed honestly. "That is not yet decided. The ones who decide are you."

“Us?”

“They plan to disguise themselves as a broker for human trafficking and make a trade with you. And pretending to be a bought woman he would get close to the mayor’s son and kill him. That’s their plan.”

“I see.”

Reiko spoke up. “What do you plan to do with this man? We got everything we wanted out of him and he knows about the mayor and us, so I think we should kill him.”

“You think so? I think it’s more beneficial to get along with an informant though.” Enokida spread out his hands saying that in disappointment. “How about I help you? I’m trusted by them and it’s simple to lure them out.”

“We can’t trust you.” Reiko was obstinate.

“Then, how about this?” Enokida took out his smartphone and made a call. “Hello. Banba-san? It’s Enokida. I know the time of the dealing with the Kakyuu group.”

[When is it gonna be?] The sound was set to speaker phone, so they could also hear his voice.

“They say it’s going to be today at ten o’clock at night. I’ll contact you later with the location.”

[Alrighty. Thanks.]

“Then, see you later.” And he cut the call there. “Do you believe me with that? After that if I tell them the meetup place then their plans can start going on the move. But if you kill me, then their plans are setback. They would be wary if my call was stopped. They would easily not come out in front of you.”

“So it’s, ‘I’ll help you out so spare me’, huh?”

“That’s what it is.”

That was not a bad deal. This informant may be of help to them in the upcoming job. A human who would do anything for the next paycheck was rather easy to handle. “Alright. We’ll do as you say. The meetup place will be in front of the Mitsukoshi lion statue. Tell them that.”

“Okay. The negotiations are finalized. Well, let’s get along from here on out.” Enokida said and placed his arms too friendly around Munakata and Reiko. With a gloomy expression Reiko brushed off his arm.

Munakata released Enokida from the restroom. As he was leaving, he stated something else odd. “Ah, that’s right. It seems the Kakyuu group hired an outrageous killer.”

“An outrageous killer?”

Enokida grinned. “Look forward to meeting him.”

The plan was made to meet their opponent before the lion statue at ten o’clock tonight. Munakata and Reiko went to visit the Kakyuu group’s office to give that report to Zhang. On their way they met up with Shinohara who was acting as bodyguard for the mayor. He summoned him for an emergency situation.

There were no more dead bodies in the office. Everything had been returned to its original state; perhaps the workers cleaned it all up. It was so clean it was unthinkable that this was the scene where six men were murdered at.

Zhang was in the center of the room. Munakata explained all of the details. “And so we have the plan to meet that man, but what shall we do then?”

“Please bring Lin to this place while pretending to remain unaware by their trap.” Zhang handed over the paper with the address on it. “It is an empty tenant building we own. The walls are sound proof, and it is a place we use often for executions and torture.”

“Understood. What shall we do with the detective Banba?”

“Ahh, then,” Zhang smiled. “We’ll have him killed by *him*.”

“Him?”

“Yes, we hired a killer.” *Actually, Enokida said something like that too*, he recalls. He mentioned that the Kakyuu Group hired an outrageous killer.

“I think he’ll be here soon.” It was when Zhang glanced down at his wrist watch. They heard the sound of knocking on the door. “Come in,” Zhang prompts.

One man came in. He was wearing a black suit and black necktie as though he was returning from a funeral. He was tall with long limbs. A Japanese sword was attached to his waist belt. The top half of his face was covered by a mask. It was the red Niwaka mask.

The moment he looked at that face, Munakata unconsciously felt he would cry out. His pulse sped up. He remembered that man to an unpleasant extent.

– It's the Niwaka Samurai.

The man who took Munakata's right eye long ago. The killer who specialized in killing killers. He never thought he would meet him again like this.

Zhang explained the details to the Niwaka Samurai. And then he handed over a scrap piece of paper. It was probably the same note he gave Munakata just previously.

"Understood." The Niwaka Samurai spoke. It was a surprisingly gentle voice. "Now then, I will go ahead and look out on the building's premises. His comrade would be waiting around there."

He said, and the Niwaka Samurai took his leave. It seemed he would be taking his own course of action. He was a bit taken aback.

Munakata and his group also left the office and returned to their vehicle.

"Shinohara and I will go to the meetup place. Reiko, go act as Yusuke's guard for that one off chance. Watch him so he doesn't leave the room."

"Understood."

He departed with Reiko, and Munakata and Shinohara got into the car. Shinohara talked excitedly in the passenger's seat. "Really, that was a surprise. The Niwaka Samurai actually does exist."

Munakata was sullen as he fastened his seat belt. "What are you so happy about? It's like he is saying he couldn't depend on us."

"Well, that's true. But, you were surprised too, weren't you?"

"Not really." He was. And then he was disappointed. At himself for feeling nervous in the presence of the Niwaka Samurai.

He looked down at his wrist watch. The time was nine forty. It was already almost time. He started the car and headed for Tenjin. *It's happening again*, he thought. He was strangely caught in red lights. It felt as though someone was impeding Munakata's path.

### **Bottom of Ninth Inning**

The date for the next exchange with the broker and the mayor's side was ten at night today. The place was in front of the Mitsukoshi lion statue. That was the call he got from Banba. It was information Enokida provided him. Returning home and changing into women's clothing, Lin headed to Tenjin on the Nishitetsu bus. He would meet with Banba in front of the Solaria Vision sign.

The time was 9:50. There was ten minutes before the exchange. *He's late*. Just as he was getting impatient he was called out by a man in a suit. The man had his shirt open wide showing his chest and his hair was closely kept back with hair gel. He initially thought he was a host from somewhere, but it was Banba.

"Sorry there, I was tardy. Preparations took some time." Banba made a grim face and said, "How 'bout it? Do I look like a mafia fella?"

"Well it's more like a struggling host."

*That's not nice at all*, Banba's shoulders slumped. He then looked Lin from top to bottom and nodded his head in approval. "You actually look rather fine."

"I know right? They're my victory clothes."

Banba told him to come decked out, so he came wearing his favorite flower patterned one-piece dress. He also put on more makeup than usual.

He was then lead by Banba, and they walked up to the coin-operated parking space. Banba's car was parked in there. A large carrying case was packed into the incredibly narrow backseat.

"I pretended to be a fella of the mayor's side and went and told the broker to cancel the exchange."

He seemed to have had Enokida look up the broker's contact information and gave him a call beforehand. Then he just had to dress up as the broker and



make the trade with the mayor's people. Banba asked as he opened the case. "You ready?"

Lin nodded. "Yeah."

He sunk down into the case, entering it in the form to hold his legs. It was a little tight, but he could bear with it for a little while.

Just before he shut the lid, Banba handed something over to him. "This here's a charm. Keep it on you."

It was the redback spider model listening device. It seemed a homing device was installed into it.

"If somethin' happens, call me on it. I'll come and save you."

Banba closed the case as he told him that. His vision turned pitch black. Lin was dragged along roughly in the case, but they stopped after a while suddenly. They had reached the meet up place.

"My apologies. I was late." A few minutes later he heard the voice of a young man. It was probably one of the people hired by the mayor. "There was a lot of traffic."

"This is the promised merchandise. Here." The voice now was Banba's. The carrying case Lin was inside was being handed over to the other person. "Now then, I'll take my leave."

After this the plan was for Banba to head back to the car and track Lin on the transmitter. Lin would be taken to the apartment building the mayor's son resides in now. Then immediately after he got alone with him and completed the assassination, Enokida would cause a blackout throughout the entire building with his specialty hacking skills. And Lin would pass through the dark and escape. That was their plan.

His body was lifted up suddenly. The case itself was being lifted up. He was probably going to be put into the trunk. He heard the sound of the engine.

After ten minutes of driving, the car suddenly came to a stop. He heard the apartment the boy was living at was in Momochihama, but they arrived unexpectedly early. The trunk opened, and he was lifted up once again and

then dragged. After some time he heard the sound of an elevator. *Have they arrived to the apartment?*

“I have brought a woman, Yusuke-san.” A man spoke. Yusuke was the name of the mayor’s son. *It is about time.* He finally made it here. In front of his sister’s adversary. The palpitation of his heart beat harder. Sweat formed on his hands.

The carrying case was opened. He was released from the airtight space. *Alright, where’s that shitty kid?* He looked around him.

However, Lin was struck into silence at the scene in front of him.

The person before him was not the mayor’s son.

It was Zhang.

“We meet again, huh, Lin.” He is grinning.

Lin’s eyes widened in shock. “Why are you here-”

*More than that, where am I? It’s not the apartment building. There’s nothing left here; it’s just a normal floor.*

*What’s the meaning of this?*

Five men surrounded the terrified Lin. They had guns facing in his direction. Beside him was Zhang and two others. Then a little ways off there was a man wearing an eye-patch and a young man wearing glasses. He had no chance in victory with five against one.

The man with the eye-patch drew closer and stated. “Your plan’s have fell through.”

“Why-” Lin was at a loss for words. *Why. How did it leak out?*

“You guys were tricked. By that man. Informants are allies of people with money. You trusted in him too much.”

*Informants? It can’t be. Enokida? So it was his work. We were set up.* Lin bit into his lip.

“Don’t move.” Zhang threatened. Without him saying it, he was not so much of an idiot to move recklessly in this situation. The person next to Zhang

approached Lin with rope in one hand and bound his hands behind his back.

“This serves you right, Lin.” Zhang was looking down on him.

It turned far down south. This was the worst case scenario. *What should he do?* He was far too worked up, and he could not make a calm decision.

Suddenly Banba’s face appeared in his mind. Banba said to call him right away if something happened. He said he would come and save him.

“Banba, can you hear me?” Turning to the bug, Lin called out for him. “The plan fell through. What should I do?”

However, there was no response.

“Hey, Banba, can you hear me?”

“- Banba as in this man?”

There was a voice abruptly from behind him.

When he turned around there was a man. He was in a business suit like the other men, but his appearance was quite different. His face was hidden by a ridiculous looking mask, and a Japanese blade was hanging from his waist. He knew that appearance. He had heard of him from rumors.

*It can’t be. This man is the Niwaka Samurai?*

The Niwaka Samurai held something in his right hand. He then tossed it at Lin. Lin gave a voiceless scream, seeing the black object fallen before him. It was a human head. It was covered in blood. He recognized the ruffled hair and the long-faced features. Both of its eyes were crushed, but there was no mistaking it.

“Ba-Banba-” His voice broke. *What is this? Why is he just a head?* He felt he was losing all hope at the shock of it.

“He was loitering around the premises of the building, so I had him killed.” The Niwaka Samurai reported with a soothing voice.

Zhang was ecstatic. “You did great.”

“You’re kidding me, there’s no way-”

*Banba is dead? He was killed? Why. Why did you go and die? Lin tightens his*

*fists and hit them against the ground. Don't you dare die. Weren't you supposed to save me? That stupid Banba.* He faced the severed head and begged it. "Save me. Hey.....Didn't you say you would save me?"

The head offered no answer. No one would save him. *What should I do now? I can't think of anything.* Tears welled up in his eyes.

"You damn kid. I'll tell you what happens when you make light of the adults."

Zhang gave him a few punches on his cheeks, but he did not have the will to resist it. He was kicked into the stomach and he vomited. He despaired at himself, groveling on the floor like a caterpillar. Like this he was no different from then. *Isn't this the exact same as that time I scavenged scrapes off the ground? Does this mean I haven't changed at all since then?*

"Hey you," Zhang gleefully ordered the Niwaka Samurai. "Cut off this guy's head."

The Niwaka Samurai nods wordlessly and drew his sword.

Lin stared closely at the severed head. *Hey, Banba. Looks like I'm going to be the same as you now soon.* He sneered in contempt.

As he was gazing at the head, he suddenly recalled Banba's words. *"You don't know what's gonna happen 'til the ninth inning has two outs and three strikes."* He said such a thing. Though he said that, he could only give up. It was difficult to even move one finger.

He knew the end result.

*It'll be game set. It's my loss.*

"It's gonna be five years worth of mentaiko."

Abruptly, Lin raised his head in surprise; he felt he had heard Banba's voice.

He quickly looked over to the head, but there was no change from before. Lin scoffed at himself. *I'm quite the idiot. There's no way a corpse would speak. It's just a hallucination. Just what was I waiting for?*

Despair had clouded over once more.

# Extra Tenth Inning

## Top of the Extra Tenth Inning

There were scenes like this in historical plays, Munakata thought. The scene of committing seppuku assisted by a follow up of a beheading.

Lin was slumped down on the floor on his knees with his arms tied behind him, and the Niwaka Samurai was taking up his sword. He grasped the hilt with both hands and lifted it high into the air. That was what Munakata recalled: the Niwaka Samurai killing that crazed killer long ago. He was able to easily imagine the scene of Lin's head being cut off and tumbling onto the floor.

However it was just after the Niwaka Samurai took up his sword. The Niwaka Samurai's lips moved. He seemed to have whispered something. He could not hear it, but he certainly said something. He could not help but feel an ominous presentiment. *What is this? Something's not right.* Munakata had a bad feeling about this. The Niwaka Samurai's grasp on his blade changed. The tip points over in their direction. It was the stance of a slugger gripping a bat more than a *kaishakunin*.

The Niwaka Samurai lifted up each of his legs and took steps forward. The same time his feet touch the floor he swung his body with great velocity. The sword cut the air. A head tumbled onto the floor. Blood spurted forth from the severed area.

" – Eh?"

*What just happened? What's the meaning of this?*

Munakata could not believe his eyes.

The one whose head was cut off was Zhang's.

Zhang's underlings, Shinohara, and even Lin at the scene were all shocked into silence. No one could comprehend the reality of the Niwaka Samurai cutting off his own employer's head.

"What the hell have you done, you bastard!" The underlings yelled. "You betrayed us?!"

“Betray?” The Niwaka Samurai answered them while shaking off the blood stuck onto his sword. “I have no recollection of becoming friends in the first place.”

It was difficult to follow the Niwaka Samurai’s movements. Before the underlings could fire their guns, the Niwaka Samurai closed the distance and pierced their hearts. The first was from the front, and the other two were from the back. The men fell at the same time.

The Niwaka Samurai looked over. Munakata and Shinohara stood there dumbfounded. Shinohara snapped back to himself in an instant and reached for his breast pocket.

“Stop!” Munakata yelled. *This isn’t an opponent you should go up against.* His warning was too late. He faced the Niwaka Samurai ten odd meters ahead of him and threw a handmade hand grenade. Munakata instantly distanced himself as to not get caught in the explosion and hid behind a pillar.

The Niwaka Samurai sheathed his sword for a moment and pulled out his scabbard from his belt. He grasped it with both hands and took his stance. And with a form like that of a baseball player he hit the flying hand grenade back. It was a terrific return to the pitcher. The hand grenade hit Shinohara’s body and exploded. The magnitude of the explosion was not that big, but it was enough to blow away one person. The chunks of Shinohara scattered around the area; Munakata clicked his tongue.

The Niwaka Samurai looked at Munakata this time. The memory from that time arose again. The day they met in the scope of the rifle. His right eye throbbed. *What should I do?* He questioned himself. *He plans to kill me. He’s serious about it.*

*Run*, his mind was screaming at him. That this was not an enemy he should go up against. However, his legs could not move. It was the same as back then. *Do I run again? If I run here, I’ll be tormented by the phantom of this man for the rest of my life. I can’t allow that.*

*Fight.*

Munakata nimbly pulled out his gun and pulled the trigger. There were three gun shots. But all of them were dodged. The Niwaka Samurai closed the

distance and made his attack. His sword swung down onto Munakata. He stopped the blade with the gun at once. He pulled out another gun with his left hand from his side holder. The Niwaka Samurai also took something out the same way. It was a short sword. His opponent's movements were a bit faster than his. The short sword sliced through Munakata's throat. Blood spurt out, dying Munakata's vision in red.

His body crumbled slowly to the right.

His cell phone went off in his breast pocket. It was probably a call from Reiko. Suddenly, he recalled Reiko's words.

*"We won't have decent deaths."*

Shinohara's arm dropped down ahead in his vision. *No kidding.* He cracked a smile.

### **Bottom of the Extra Tenth Inning**

The actors who were leading parts until now were suddenly pulled off stage in the middle of a performance and were put into the audience seats. The play he was not included in was unfolding before his very eyes. The scenario and cast were completely different than just previously. *Just what is this farce? What was I in the end? I wasn't a lead role?* It was the miserable actor watching the scene of a play dumbfounded. That was how Lin felt right now. An inconceivable clown.

He had no idea of what just happened. The man who was going to cut off his head for some reason cut off Zhang's. That was not the only matter either. He killed the other killers and the members of the organization as well. In the blink of an eye, everyone but Lin was cut down by the samurai's sword. The entire floor was a big disaster.

After having killed the eye-patch man, the Niwaka Samurai turned his blade at Lin. *What, so I'm also going to be killed now?* Lin prepared himself for it. However, it seemed that was not the case. He just cut the rope binding Lin with that sword. Both his hands were free. When Lin got up, the Niwaka Samurai sheathed his sword. It did not appear he wanted to fight with Lin. *So this man isn't an enemy? Why is he on my side?* He did not understand what he was thinking.

Together with that mask, he was a creepy guy.

“.....Who are you?” Lin asked him with a low voice baring weariness. “Why did you save me?”

And then the Niwaka Samurai tilted his head in confusion.

“What’s that now?” It was a facetious voice. “You haven’t done realized it?”

It was a familiar Hakata dialect.

*It can’t be, he thought. No, there’s no way. He died. Didn’t his severed head fall right in front of me?*

“It’s me here. Me.”

The Niwaka Samurai took off his mask.

His real identity was indeed Banba.

“Ba-Banba!” Lin’s eyes widened and he raised his voice. “You were alive?! Then, this head is-”

“I gone and bought the head at the cleaners and asked a plastic surgeon make it look exactly like me. Then I asked a former beauty artist I know to make the hair the same as mine. Fooled you, didn’t I?”

He was. “Then, it can’t be. This was the plan from the beginning? Tricking me.”

“I said I’m sorry. Dontcha be so angry about it.” Banba apologized with a wary smile, but Lin is still frowning.

However, it was fine. He was relieved. Now just what he was relieved about he himself was not sure. *Was it because his life was saved, because Banba was not dead, or because Zhang was killed without a hitch? Or perhaps it was all of it.*

“Ohh. You went all out again, huh, Banba.” The door opened and a man appeared. It was the detective Shigematsu. He brought in three subordinate-like men. “It seems you’ll need some cleaning up done.”

“I’m gonna finish cleanin’ up the rest of the guys now.”

“Sorry, Banba. I’m always having you do the dirty work all the time.”



“Dontcha fret over that.”

“Leave this to us. We’ll do it thoroughly.”

Nodding at Shigematsu’s words, Banba turned over to him. “Lin, can you stand? We’re goin’.”

“Where to?”

“To punish that perveted kid.” After saying that, Banba made a call. “Hello, Jiro? We finished up ‘round here. We’re gonna head over to the apartment now.”

As they were leaving the building, a familiar mini cooper was parked. It was Banba’s car. Banba set the Japanese sword in the back seat and then opened the door to the driver’s seat. Since the handle was on the left side, as Lin was getting into the passenger’s seat on the right side he asked. “Just who are you?”

“Hm?” Banba tilted his head, playing dumb.

“Was it a lie that you’re a private detective?”

“I am one.” Banba answered as he started the car’s engine. “I’m a detective and a killer.”

“A killer of killers?”

“That’s a bit off. I got the request occasionally to kill a killer. Then catching on from that I just got called that.”

“On that note, just what is a Niwaka Samurai? Are you just messing around? Having a weird mask and a Japanese sword. Why do you have a get-up that stands out so much? Even though you’re a killer.”

“Well about that there,” stepping on the acceleration, Banba flashed his teeth in a grin. “It’s the same as those there red-back spiders.”

He did not understand the meaning of it at all.

While he was sheltered in Jiro’s bar, Saitou leaned back into the store’s benches and took a nap. Jiro went out somewhere. Since he was bothered that he was not doing anything even though he was being taken care of Saitou decided to help with store preparations. As he was doing simple work such as

sweeping the floor and wiping the sake bottles with a cloth Jiro came back.

“We found the group who set you up. Come with me.” Jiro had said. And then Saitou rode in his car once again. Last time he was in the trunk, but this time he was in the passenger’s seat. He was glad about that.

After driving for awhile, Fukuoka Tower came into view. This area was stunning even at night. Jiro’s destination was a tall apartment building around that area. Saitou felt a bit timid at such a high quality entrance.

“The person who set me up is in this apartment building?”

“That’s right. In the room on the highest floor.”

They head to the highest floor by taking a large elevator. He started to get nervous. *Just what is going to happen now?* He was anxious.

As they were doing that, the doors of the elevator opened. In front of the door to the room stands two people. One was wearing a lovely flower patterned one-piece dress, but it was soiled in blood. A bruise stood out on her pale face. The other was wearing a suit and a mask. He had a Japanese sword in his hand. They appeared to be a rather boisterous and mismatched pair. It seemed the man in the suit was an acquaintance of Jiro. When he noticed Jiro, he friendly waved at them.

“Sorry. Were you waiting?”

“No, we just got here.” The masked man answered. He talked in a gentle, kind manner. “And that fella there is the one who got wrapped up in all this here mess?”

The man somehow knew about Saitou. Jiro explained to him firsthand.

“That’s right. He got blamed for another person’s crime.” He moved his gaze to the one next to the masked man. “Then this boy here is the child whose sister was killed, right?”

*A boy? She’s not a woman?* He was surprised. *He was crossdressing then?* Having that said, he felt his Adam’s apple bob a little bit.

The masked man glanced over at the door to the room and said. “The targets are both in the room. Those folks won’t go out from there.”

“What should we do then? How do we get in?”

“Havin’ it opened from inside will do.” The masked man took out a cell phone from his pant’s pocket.

“Where do you plan to make a call to?”

“No, we’re gonna wait for them to call. I took this here cellphone from the eye-patch fella’s pocket.”

The crossdressing man was surprised by the man’s words. “When did you-”

As he was saying this, a call came in to the cell phone.

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Translation Notes:

*Kaishakunin* (介錯人) is the second put in charge whose role is to behead the person committing *seppuku*. This is so they are put out of the worst agony before death.

# Extra Eleventh Inning

## Top of the Extra Eleventh Inning

“.....This is strange.”

Reiko whispered as she was pacing around like an unrest dog in Yusuke Harada’s living room.

“What’s strange now?”

Ignoring Yusuke’s unapprehensive lisping, Reiko inclined her head in doubt. “It should be alright to contact them by now, yet just what are they doing.....”

Having become worried, she decided to give them a call. On the third call, the other picked up. “Hello. Munakata?”

[You’re Reiko Asakura, right?] It was not Munakata.

Reiko’s voice lowered in pitch. “Who are you?”

[The Niwaka Samurai – would you know if I told you that?]

The Niwaka Samurai. It was the killer of killers. That sort of man made the phone call. Or perhaps he was using her comrade’s cell phone. In that case-

“It can’t be-”

[Your friend was killed.]

Her ill premonition becoming realized, Reiko’s expression froze up. “Wh-what did you say?”

[My target is the mayor’s son. I’m coming to kill him now.]

And then the call dropped there.

Yusuke called out to her. “Reiko-san, something fell.”

“Eh?”

“Over there,” Yusuke pointed to the floor.

A small, black mass was fallen at her feet. It probably fell the moment she took out her phone. But she did not recall having put anything else in her

pocket.

“What is this?”

“Ah, it’s a spider.” Yusuke picked it up. “It’s a dead spider.”

“Give that to me.” Reiko picks it up from the side. “.....This isn’t a spider.”

It was hard for a spider. When she crushed it, machine pieces flew out from the inside. *Is it a listening device? Or could it be a transmitter?* There was the possibility of it being both.

*Still, when was this placed? Who was responsible for it?* Reiko searched through her mind for it. And then she suddenly recalled. That informant Enokida at that time unnaturally wrapped his arms around her shoulder. It could be that he stealthily planted that in her jacket’s pocket at that moment. She had been had.

Then that meant from that point on all of her movements were being tracked. This was bad. The Niwaka Samurai said he was going to go kill the mayor’s son. If he was a cohort of that informant, then their location had been found out thanks to the transmitter and bug.

*I got to get out of here quickly before the killer comes.* As she was just trying to leave the living room, her arm was grabbed from behind. Yusuke asked, “Where are you going?”

“I’m running away.”

“Why?”

Her irritation surged up within her. Reiko yelled, “A tremendous killer is coming to kill you! If I don’t get away quickly, then I’ll be killed too!”

When she shook off his arm, Yusuke made a face like a thrown away puppy. “Hey, Reiko-san. You won’t abandon me, right? Right?”

She felt sick. “Why should I give up my life for a low scum of a man like you?!”

She left Yusuke behind and got out of the living room. As she was just putting her shoes on in the *genkan* and opened the door, Reiko’s eyes widened in shock.

“Hii~, it’s the avengers~” A man was standing there. “You’re not getting away.”

### **Bottom of the Extra Eleventh Inning**

*Just what is going to happen from here on out?* Saitou watched over the development with apprehensive emotions.

The masked man dropped the call and after awhile the door to the room suddenly opened. A woman rushed out from inside.

“Hii~, it’s the avengers~” Jiro grabbed onto her without a moment’s delay. “You’re not getting away.”

The woman in the suit became rigid. “W-wait, who are you?”

“Saitou-chan, there’s no mistake it’s this woman?” Jiro asked him. “The one who called out to you.”

He recognized the woman’s face. *It’s this woman*, he thought. *That night, this woman called out to me and we rode in a taxi together.* Saitou nodded repeatedly. “Y-yes! There’s no mistake, it’s this person!”

“You’re Reiko Asakura, right?”

“What if I am? Your target is that perverted son, right? He’s inside, so do what you want.” Reiko said impudently. It was the manner speaking as though she was not relevant.

“We have some business with you. I heard you framed someone of a crime?” Jiro inquired as he still grasped her arm. “We’ll have you play the role of the culprit for all the incidents.”

Jiro gave her a punch into her solar plexus, and Reiko lost consciousness. After binding her so she could not escape, he lifted her up onto his shoulders. “Here we go.....She’s rather heavy.”

The masked man gave them instructions. “Would you mind stayin’ here and watch so Yusuke Harada don’t scurry away? We’ll go in and check.”

“Got it.”

The masked man and the cross-dressing man enter the room. They investigated the room one part at a time in turn from the *genkan* and proceed

down the long hallway.

“He ain’t in the toilet.”

“The bathroom is empty too.”

“Don’t look like this room is used.”

“He isn’t here either. Where is he hiding?”

“Probably right here.”

It was when the masked man tried to open the doors at the end leading to the living room. Suddenly the bathroom door opened and a man dashed out into the hallway. He was likely Yusuke. Maybe he was hiding in the bath tub in the bathroom, but they had missed him. Yusuke held a gun. He had it pointing to the men.

“Look out!” Jiro yelled. “Behind you!”

The masked man and the cross-dresser turned around together. Yusuke yelled, “die!” Both of them were slow to react at the unforeseen event. In the narrow hallway, they could not dodge a bullet. Jiro could not move about because he was carrying the woman. And so Saitou was the only one who can make a move.

*I have to do something*, he thought.

And in that moment, a baseball was at the edge of Saitou’s sight. A professional baseball player’s signed ball was placed on top of the shoe cupboard. Saitou instantly reached out towards it. He grabbed the ball, took his stance and threw. The distance to Yusuke was up to six meters. It was enough. It was a straight throw with all his might put into it. The ball without losing the pitch’s force sunk into Yusuke’s back. Yusuke dropped down to his knees and writhed in agony. He writhed on top of the hallway floor. In that opening the masked man pinned him down from above and restrained Yusuke.

“Nice ball.” The corners of the masked man’s mouth curved up. “We was saved thanks to you. You throw a good there pitch.”

Saitou gave a shy smile. “I was a pitcher since high school.”

“He apparently went to Koshien as well.” Jiro said excitedly. “Say, Saitou-

chan. We play grass-lot baseball, but would you play with us? We don't have a pitcher or shortstop so we're in a pinch."

*They don't have a pitcher or shortstop? Then they're,* he thought. "Um, what is your team's name?"

"Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens."

*So that was it.* He recalled the poster he spotted at the supermarket previously. That posted that said 'In the middle of recruiting members! Welcoming beginners! In need of a pitcher and shortstop.' Who knew that ridiculous name of a grass-lot baseball team was theirs. He felt it was as though it was fate. Though he had already decided not to play baseball anymore, he ended up replying with "I'll think about it."

After stuffing the bound Yusuke and Reiko into the car, Jiro brought Saitou to the nearest business hotel. With this Saitou's role has finished. After this he could leave the rest to them. Surely they could clean everything up well.

"Really, thank you so much, Jiro-san. I'm really in debt to you for many things." Saitou bowed his head deeply.

"It's fine. It's work. ....Ah, that's right." As they were departing, Jiro stuck his head out of the car window and handed him a business card. "Here, take this."

It was the business card of a director of a clinic called the Saeki cosmetic surgery clinic.

"Cosmetic surgery?"

"He's a very skilled doctor, so you can use him. The incident was reported on nation-wide news, so you probably can't walk outside with that face now, right?"

*So that means to have plastic surgery and change his face then?* In truth, it might be better to do so. He felt bad about it as his parents gave him this face, but it did bother him to keep exposing his face that had been reported as a murderer nationally in front of people. If he changed his face he could run away from that company as well, and he felt he could move forward with a new life. *This may be a good chance,* he thought.

Lin was in the passenger's seat. The one driving was Banba. After awhile the



sea came into view. It was a pier. They stepped into one of the warehouses lined up on it. Inside the okama Jiro was waiting. There was a chair in the center, and the mayor's son, Yusuke Harada, was sitting in it bound.

"If you don't want to be killed, speak honestly." Banba threatened. Jiro was filming Yusuke trembling in fear and cold.

"Face the camera and say your name."

".....Yusuke Harada."

"And your father's name and occupation?"

"Shotaro Harada. He's the mayor."

"How many women have you killed up to now?"

"Don't know. I forgot. I think about five."

"Yet despite that why have you not been caught?"

"My father would solve it with money."

"You were the one who raped and killed the Chinese person Qiaomei Lin, right?"

".....That's right."

"Say it."

"Of-of what?"

"Clearly say in front of the camera 'I raped and killed Qiaomei Lin.' Face the relatives of the people you killed and the people you caused problems with and apologize."

"I-I raped and killed Qiaomei Lin! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Unconscious of his actions, Lin moved. Before he realized it his left hand had grasped the man's collar and his right hand struck the man's cheek.

"Oo-bah" Suddenly being hit, the man yelled pitifully.

After punching him with his right hand, he then punched him with his left. Yusuke's body and the chair itself fell over. He then hung over him from above and continued to pound his face in switching between his right and left hands.

“How ‘bout leavin’ it there. He’ll die.” Banba got a hold of Lin’s shoulders and stopped him. “Well, he’s gonna get killed regardless.”

“Ahh, hello, Enokida-chan?” Jiro was making a call. “I sent you the video right now. I’ll leave the editing to you. Change Banba-chan’s voice and cut the last kid shown in the end.”

Lin asked Jiro. “What do you plan to do?”

“An electromagnetic wave hijack.” The one who answered was Banba. “We’re gonna play this footage on all of Fukuoka’s City’s TVs. Not just the household TVs. Various places like the Solaria big screen or the large vision screen around Hakata Station. The mayor will be overthrown with this.”

Yusuke yelled. “Let me go already! I apologized didn’t I?!”

“Do you think you’ll be forgiven by just apologizing?” Jiro glared. “There are plenty of people who resent you. Everyone is thinking they want you to get the same treatment. The same fate as the victims you raped and killed. If you think women are the only ones who could get raped that is a huge misunderstanding. I called my gay friend in today. He’s an unmatched stone butch. Prepare yourself.”

“An eye for an eye, a rape for a rape, right?” Another man voiced from inside the warehouse. A black man appeared from the darkness. It was the torturer Martinez who punched Lin. He looked at Yusuke and grinned. “How nice. It is a naive kid who doesn’t know anything of the world. They’re my favorite.”

Yusuke turned pale. Tears are pouring out, and he is shaking. Just what sort of torture he is going to go through now is terrifying to even imagine. To this man it will be the worst punishment.

Jiro asked Banba and Lin. “We’re going to start the torture now, but what will you two do?”

“Will you watch and learn?” Martinez smiled indecently. “I’ll greatly welcome you to partake in it as well.”

Banba looked over at him. He still wore a mask, but he knew he was asking ‘what do you want to do?’

“No, I’m fine. I don’t want to look at his face any longer.” Lin shook his head. “But I’ll say my thanks. Just by seeing his pathetic, crying face made me feel better a little.”

Jiro smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Then, let’s get goin’. Thank you for the assistance, Jiro, Mar-san.”

While walking down a path piled up with containers, he faced Banba’s back and addressed him. “Hey, you requested them right? The avengers.”

“Well, yeah.” Banba came to a halt. He turned around and answered as he was taking off his mask. “I also made a request. To release the mayor’s wrong doings, and that I wanted social justice. If he had that much authority, the people wouldn’t have no power to judge against him. And so with this your sister got paid off a bit as well, right?”

“.....It was unnecessary.”

Although he gave curses, Banba was playing ignorance.

“You hungry?”

Now that he mentioned it, he had not eaten anything today. As though to reply back to Banba’s words, his stomach growled.

“When we get back home, I’ll go and make some ramen.”

Banba grinned, flashing his teeth.

“.....Tonkotsu ramen again?”

*Though he says he’ll make it, he just puts it in hot water. How dare he say something so condescending.* While muttering complaints in his mind, he recalled the flavor of the cup ramen he ate from that time and saliva began to moisten his dried up mouth. The scent of that savory tonkotsu soup.

His nostrils twitched just recalling it. “.....Well I’ll have it. It’s principle to not waste food after all.”

Banba started to walk. He followed behind him. Suddenly his side stung sharply. It seemed his wound had opened, and blood was pouring out onto his clothes. *That’s right, I was injured.* He frowned recalling it. *Ahh, it hurts. I don’t*

*have any strength in my body.* Lin finally crouched over at that spot.

“Damn, it hurts.”

Banba stopped and turned around. “What’s wrong there?”

“Seems my wound opened up.” He spat out pitifully.

“Oh yikes.” Banba approached him and peered at Lin’s face. “You alright?”

He stood up with his hand on the wall. However, his feet were unsteady. “I’m not alright at all. I’m dizzy.”

“Can you walk?”

“.....I can’t.” He could walk if he tried, but he did not feel like trying.

As though he perceived Lin’s feelings, Banba broke into a smile. “Should I give you a piggy back?”

“.....Do it.”

“Alrighty.”

Banba stooped down in front of him. Looking at the lean figure, Banba’s back was larger than he expected.

# Hero Interview

After that the scandal of the true son came to light, and Shotaro Harada lost his position.

The mayoral election, which spoke of even Mayor Harada's complete victory, allowed for another candidate to be elected easily. It started with the footage, and then the collusion between Shotarou Harada and the underground organizations were let out. The incidents with Shotarou Harada and his son Yusuke were a shock to the Fukuoka people. The mayor was caught, and his son was dead. Saitou was also surprised when he heard the ringleader's name behind the slaughter of Zhang and his comrades and the kidnapping of Yusuke to be Reiko Asakura. The character "fu" in *fukushuuya* (avengers) did not even appear. It was a jumbled up conclusion, but it seemed the case as been resolved. Saitou's innocence had been cleared too. At any rate, he was relieved.

The Hakata bus terminal today was crowded with people. A game with the victorious Hawks was in session, and the bus stop to Fukuoka Dome was teeming with people. Saitou went underground. There were too many people on the surface. But there were many people at the subway too. They were heading from China Town's station to the dome.

Saitou got off the train at Tenjin. It was to visit the Saeki cosmetic surgery clinic the avenger Jiro introduced him to. It was a snug, little clinic. There was a bulletin board in the waiting room. On it there was one poster that caught his eye. It was that poster from the grass-lot baseball team Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens he spotted before at the supermarket. It was the team Jiro was a part of. They had that poster here as well.

When he looked closer at the poster, the line with 'In need of a pitcher and shortstop' had a strike through the 'and shortstop' part and had it changed to just 'in need of a pitcher.' They must have found a shortstop. All that was left was the vocals.

In need of a pitcher. Saitou felt as though it was calling out to him. *You're a pitcher, right? You're experienced, right? Then how about playing baseball*

*again?* That was what the paper was telling him. *How about playing baseball again. Maybe I should try to pitch one more time. Right now I feel like I can.* That was what he thought. *This is surely a last chance God has given me.* He decided in his heart to have his surgery, get a new face and start baseball again.

After the surgery, Saitou made a call to Jiro. When he told him he would like to join the team, Jiro was overjoyed.

He was told that next week they have a practice game so he would like him to come to it. The day of the game Jiro met up with him at Saitou's apartment in a car. The plastic surgeon Saeki and the torturer Martinez were also carpooling with them. It seemed everyone was on the same team. Misaki was in the passenger's seat. She seemed to be their cheerleader.

The location of the game was at a great public baseball stadium. They appeared to be renting it for three hours. When Saitou arrived most of the members were gathered at the benches.

"You're Saitou-kun, right? I'm the coach, Genzo. Nice to meet ya."

He exchanged a handshake with the potbelly man in his late-fifties.

"I am Saitou. Nice to meet you."

"I heard from Jiro there. You was an ace from a veteran school? I'm lookin' forward to seein' you at work."

"Well, I've been away from baseball for quite a bit though." Saitou smiled ambiguously. "I will try my best as to not be a burden."

"Alrighty then, here. This is our team uniform."

He said, but he could not say even as he bowed that the T-shirt he was given was a cool design. The color of the shirt was a baby pink, and the words TONKOTSU was written in a gothic text font with a silhouette of a pig printed on the front. On the back was the player's number and name. On Saitou's it was with SAITOH and his number was number 18. It was an ace number. The hat was the same color as the shirt with an R mark on it. It probably was the first character for Ramens. He did not think it was cool, but when he put it on it fit perfectly.

“This is the order for today. Saitou-kun, you’re pitcher nine.”

He looked at the paper posted on the bench.

#1 Center Fielder – Enokida

#2 Right Fielder – Yamato

#3 Left Fielder – Jiro

#4 First Base – Martinez

#5 Second Base – Banba

#6 Catcher – Shigematsu

#7 Third Base – Saeki

#8 Shortstop – Lin

And there was Saitou’s name for #9 pitcher.

The seven members gathered each have already began to make their preparations for the game. “Saitou-chan, let’s play catch.” Jiro invited him.

As he was warming up while playing catch, a young man with gaudy colored haired grumbled complaints to Martinez while practicing his swings. “I’ve had enough of the helmet.”

On the young male’s back were the characters ENOKIDA. He was the center fielder Enokida. He seemed like a lead-off man and had the built to be fast on his feet.

“I really don’t like wearing hats or helmets that much. It messes with my hair. Well, Martinez, you’re bald so you wouldn’t understand how I feel.”

“Heh. So it was a hair style thing? I thought it was something with the helmet.”

“Shut up.”

This time the catcher Shigematsu called out to Saitou. “Saitou-kun, did you warm up? Should we give it a go?”

“Ah, yes please.”

As they easily decided on a sign and Shigematsu took a seat, he threw a few

balls. He then saw a car park in the parking lot behind the backstop. Two men wearing the Tonkotsu Ramens uniforms got out of the red mini cooper and walked over to them.

“Like I said, I don’t want to play baseball.”

“Think of it as though you was tricked and give at a go. It’s rather fun.”

“That won’t be fun at all. I know without trying.”

“Dontcha say that, Lin-Lin.”

“Don’t call me like some sort of panda, idiot-Ban (ban-baka).”

They looked like two people he had seen before. It was a petite man with long hair tied back into a ponytail, and the other was a tall, lean man. On the backs of their uniforms LIN and BANBA were written. So they were the shortstop Lin and second base Banba then. With this everyone had been gathered. The number on their backs were number six for the former and number two for the latter. Looking at just the numbers on their backs, they seemed like a very good combination as infielders.

“You were rather late.” Shigematsu addressed Banba.

“This fella was makin’ hell-a ruckus about it.” Banba pointed with his chin at Lin. “It took a long time just to get that uniform on him.”

“On that note, what’s up with these clothes? They’re out of style. They’re so unfashionable.”

“It looks fine on you, Lin-chan. They’re very cool.”

“I’m not at all pleased with that.”

Shigematsu was exasperated at the two continuing to bicker at each other. “Look, go and get ready already. The other team is waiting.” The opposing team was also a circle of working adults, and they had a wide range of ages among members from people in their twenties to in their forties. Their own team barely had enough people, so the baseball umpire and base umpire came from the other team.

The Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens ended up taking the field first on a coin toss. Everyone took their designated defense positions. As Saitou was smoothing



down the mound dirt with his feet,

“I don’t really know any of the rules of baseball though.”

Lin, who was stationed as the shortstop, said a shocking revelation. *Hey, hey. Is that alright? This is grass-lot baseball*, he laughs.

The person on second, Banba, faced Lin and said, “you can just catch the flyin’ ball and throw it to first.”

“First? Where’s first?”

“Over yonder. You throw it to that person. The Dominican, Mar-san.”

“Hmph.”

Top of the first inning. It was the opposing team’s offense.

Saitou stood up yet he could not keep a fixed control. The first batter was provided with a foul ball, and a runner was promptly out.

“Don’t mind it” Banba on second called out to him.

They did not get a strike, but his mood did not worsen. The ball was reaching. It was not like he could not completely throw like in the past. *It’s alright. I can do this. I can hold back*. Saitou nodded.

No outs, and one runner on first base. It was the second batters turn. He threw a slider. The batter hit it. The slow ball was heading towards the shortstop. *Crap*, he thought. It was hit towards the beginner. The runner on first ran to second base. Banba also turned toward the base.

Lin reacted to the hit. He thought it would be an error, but Lin was fast. He had good motor reflexes. He lowered his glove and caught the ball before making the motion of a throw. “Hey!” Banba yelled. He opened his glove preparing to catch the ball on second base. Lin moved the ball over to his right hand and threw it.

*Alright, a ground ball, and a double-play.*

So he thought, but Lin threw towards first base instead of second. The ball was caught on the first bounce and they succeeded in their first catch.

The base umpire on first base tightened his fist. “Out!”

A strange atmosphere lingered in the area. Only Lin was smiling. "What's this? Baseball is rather easy." He said with a proud face.

The runner was left on second base.

"How did I do?" He looked over at Banba with an expression like a kid got a hundred score on a test. "I got an out."

Banba was furious. "Why didn't you throw it over here (at second)?!"

"Haa? Why are you mad?" Lin was taken aback from suddenly being yelled at. "You said to throw it at that person."

"There was two runners though. You throw to second, and I throw to first. Then we can get two outs. If you throw just to first, we only get one person out. Got it?"

".....Then say that from the start. For something as important as that."

*Well for the time being let's not let them hit a ground ball.* Saitou decided in his mind. The next one at bat returned Saitou's pitch. It was a straight. *Did they get it?* Though contrary to what he expected, the ball did not go far. It was a fly near left field. Jiro caught it and easily threw it to Saeki on third.

Two outs. The runner on could not move from second.

For the next batter he continued by pitching a fast ball. He drove in two foul balls, and the last one was a straight ball he threw with everything he had. The batter missed. Three strikes. With that there were three outs. His mood felt better. His speed with the ball, his control, and his quick charged balls. He felt the pitcher he was in the past was back. When the batter missed his high straight ball, he unconsciously made a small triumphant pose.

And now it was the offense switch. The Tonkotsu Ramens' offense was brilliant. The first batter Enokida made it on base with a safety bunt. The second batter Yamato settled on a sacrifice bunt. There was one out with a runner on second base. The third batter Jiro receiving encouragement from Misaki in the benches, "Jiro, good luck!" made a standard grounder, but he made it on base due to an error at second. In that time frame, Enokida proceeded to third base. The fourth batter Martinez made an extra large home run. The score was three to zero. It was good right now.

Saitou gave support from the benches until his turn came around. It had been some time since he yelled like this, and it felt nice. The past reemerged. Of the days in high school he spent doing nothing but baseball. He finally remembered. *I love baseball.*

Then the fifth batter Banba made a three-base hit passing the first base line. Continuing onto the sixth batter Shigematsu with three strikes. Two outs with one person on third base. The seventh batter Saeki, persisting on the ninth pitch with a foul ball in the end.

The eighth batter Lin entered the batter's box.

"If you make a hit you run to first base, you hear?!" Banba jeered on top of third base. "Dontcha come over here!"

"Shut up, idiot Ban! I know at least that much!"

Lin made a huge swing for the first fast ball and hit it on the end of the bat. It was a short grounder, but Lin's speed allowed him to make it. It was an infield hit. During that time Banba made it to home plate and changed the score to four to zero.

"Did you see that?!" Lin was shouting on the first base. He seemed pleased. "I made a hit!"

"Lin-chan, Lin-chan." Banba having returned to the benches jeered once more. "When you make a hit, you can drop the bat. You don't gotta run with it. It ain't a relay baton."

"I said shut up! I'll kill you!" Lin threw the bat he grasped in his right hand in embarrassment.

Now then, Saitou's turn at bat had come around. Saitou always was the pitcher, but he was also good at batting. *Let's go for a big shot here.* He stood in the batter's box, firing himself up.

He took up the bat and looked up at the pitcher.

The pitcher took his stance and threw. It was the pitcher's first pitch to him.

He was suddenly taken aback.

The ball was flying at him. It was a straight line aiming at Saitou's head.

There was a dull thunk. He felt the impact. The ball hit Saitou's helmet. The helmet flew off, and Saitou's body rolled over.

Saitou dropped right there. He felt a sharp pain like that of being hit with a large hammer. His head felt like it was splitting. He was dizzy.

His team mates all rushed over to him. "Saitou-kun, are you alright?" Someone was calling out to him. "Hey, someone call an ambulance." There was also that voice.

*What happened?* He had that feeling.

The Tonkotsu nine surrounded Saitou and looked down at him in worry.

Among them only Jiro was smiling. Jiro put his hands together, tilted his head to the right and chuckled. It was the expression as though he was saying "Sorry~."

*What's the meaning of this?*

His gaze wandered. He saw the opposing pitcher. He looked unconcerned and approached him.

*Wait*, he thought.

That pitcher's face looked familiar. He resembled the player he hit in the head during high school.

– It can't be.

*No, there is no way this is possible. Is it a coincidence? Is this a coincidence? Or was this set up from the beginning? Was he set up by this avenger? Since when was I the target?*

He gazed at the pitcher's face in his hazy consciousness. Those lips moved. "You reaped what you sowed." He felt like he heard that voice.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Misaki looked like she was smiling, watching from the benches.



### Translation Notes:

With the “fu” in fukushuuya comment, the first character in the word fukushuu (revenge) is read as “fuku” not just “fu.” So if I were to make a guess, I think because “fu” (不) is one of the characters that has a negative meaning, the narration might be pointing out how odd it is that no one questioned it. This in turn could mean that Jiro has Shigematsu involved in the official statement so Reiko could receive the blame.

# Afterword

To begin with, a disclaimer:

This story is fiction. The 3% of Hakata's population is killers statistic is an utter lie. Fukuoka is very peaceful, and it is a wonderful city. There are hardly any cases of shootings. (Though there have been accidental shootings of hand guns at middle schools occasionally.) It is a city to safely spend time in, so please rest assured for those who plan to travel or move to Fukuoka.

Now then, this work has received the grand prize award in the Dengeki Novel Prize. I feel the number of other applicants are in a league of their own for a Dengeki Grand Prize so.....just how this work had won I still do not quite understand. I was told by my friend as I was telling them that I answered 'I want to become a pitcher like Masahiro Yamamoto in the future (I meant as a long active author)' at the interview for the award ceremony, "did you get the Sawamura Award?" .....Leaving that aside, I did set the story as the title indicates in Fukuoka.

I was born and raised in Fukuoka City, but since I am not a natural-born Hakatan there may be some mix-ups in the Hakata dialect that appear in this work. I simply wanted to pay close attention to the nuance words like the differences between '*bai*' and '*tai*,' so I hope you at least enjoy the feeling of Hakata.

It is truly a nice city, Fukuoka. The food is delicious. If I got you to think, "I would like to go to Fukuoka" then there is no greater happiness for me.

And now the rest will be expressing thanks.

First to everyone who participated in the selection and to everyone who made their contributions to the publication I give my thanks. For heads in editing Wada-sama and Endou-sama. I am very heartfelt for you two always helping me. I hope to work with you more. I'm looking forward to the *motsu nabe* (water quenching?).

And for Ichihiro Hako who drew these cool and stylistic illustrations. It is an honor to work with another who received the same grand prize award. Let's go

see a musical next time together.

And then for Ryohgo Narita who wrote me recommendations. Thank you for your help at such a busy time. Truthfully speaking the first novel I bought that was of Dengeki Bunko was Narita-sensei's work, so I am extremely and deeply moved to make an affiliation with you.

And finally my greatest thanks to the readers who picked up this work. I want to make the effort to be able to show growth in my next work.

– Chiaki Kisaki

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#### Translation Notes:

1. Masahiro Yamamoto – A left-handed, retired pitcher who pitched for the Chunichi Dragons for 29 years.
2. Eiji Sawamura Award – Commonly known as just the Sawamura Award, is an honor bestowed upon the top starting pitcher in the Nippon Professional Baseball every year. It began as an honor to the career of the power pitcher Eiji Sawamura in 1947.
3. Hakata Dialect – *Bai* is like the emphasis word in place of *yo*. *Tai* is sort of a nuance as Kisaki mentions. For Japanese learners, [here is a basic rundown of Hakataben](#). Naturally Japanese sources offer more on the matter, so if you can read Japanese more or less fine [I recommend this site which provides a nice list of common expressions](#).